



Church and poverty in South Africa: Historical analysis and missional ecclesiology



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Poverty remains a critical socio-economic challenge in South Africa, deeply rooted in the country's history of colonialism and apartheid. This article examines the multifaceted role of churches in poverty alleviation efforts in South Africa, spanning both historical and contemporary contexts. Through analysis of historical records and contemporary literature, it argues that while churches have significantly addressed poverty, a more comprehensive and transformative approach is needed. The study proposes adopting a missional ecclesiology framework to enhance the effectiveness of church-led poverty alleviation initiatives, offering insights into how churches can engage more deeply and sustainably in the fight against poverty.

Contribution: This research contributes to existing scholarship by: (1) Providing a comprehensive historical analysis of church involvement in poverty alleviation in South Africa. (2) Critically examining challenges and opportunities in contemporary church-led poverty alleviation efforts. (3) Proposing missional ecclesiology as a framework for enhancing church-based poverty alleviation initiatives. (4) Offering practical recommendations for churches to address poverty within South Africa's unique socio-economic context.

Keywords: poverty alleviation; South Africa; church; missional ecclesiology; social justice; historical analysis; contemporary challenges; transformative approach.

Introduction

Poverty is one of the most significant socio-economic challenges in South Africa, deeply rooted in the country's history of colonialism and apartheid (Kabongo 2019:3; Kakwata 2020:105). Despite the transition to democracy in 1994 and extensive efforts by both government and civil society, millions of South Africans continue to face daily hardships, including limited access to essential services, unemployment and restricted opportunities for socio-economic mobility (Boyes, Berg & Cluver 2017:195; Kabongo 2019:4). These challenges persist because of entrenched systemic inequalities and social injustices that have proven resistant to change despite ongoing interventions (Kabongo 2019:4; Kakwata 2020:107).

South Africa's poverty rates remain high, with over half the population living below the national poverty line, according to recent data (Statistics South Africa 2017:5). Historical factors, such as the discriminatory policies of apartheid and contemporary issues, including economic inequality, unemployment and inadequate access to quality education and healthcare, exacerbate this situation. Given this context, poverty alleviation remains a priority for state and non-state actors. Among these, churches have emerged as vital players, contributing to social justice advocacy, direct aid provision and community development. The involvement of churches in poverty alleviation spans from the early 20th century to the present day and includes diverse activities, ranging from direct aid to advocating for systemic change (De Gruchy 2005:195).

The engagement of churches with poverty in South Africa has evolved significantly over the years, reflecting each period's socio-economic and political contexts. This development can be delineated into five distinct periods: the early 20th century (1900–1940), mid-20th century (1940–1980), post-apartheid era (1990–2000), early 21st century challenges (2000–2020) and contemporary engagement (2020–present). During these periods, churches transitioned from a focus on charity and paternalistic attitudes to a more robust advocacy for social justice and systemic transformation, aligning increasingly with the principles of missional ecclesiology (Baron & Maponya 2020:2; Thinane 2021:2).

This article explores the role of churches in addressing poverty in South Africa from historical and contemporary perspectives, paying particular attention to how missional ecclesiology has

shaped these efforts. It argues that while churches have made substantial contributions throughout these periods, a more comprehensive and transformative approach is required to address poverty's complex and systemic nature. This article proposes a missional ecclesiology framework as a promising strategy to enhance the impact of church-led poverty alleviation initiatives. Through a qualitative analysis of historical records, contemporary literature and case studies, the article aims to provide insights into how churches can more effectively contribute to poverty alleviation in South Africa.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine the role of churches in poverty alleviation in South Africa. The research is grounded in a comprehensive literature review and historical analysis.

Literature review

The review synthesises contemporary perspectives on church-led poverty alleviation and missional ecclesiology. Sources include academic articles, books and reports from religious and secular scholars, providing a holistic view of churches' role in socio-economic transformation efforts. This review covers literature published between 1994 and 2024, focusing on post-apartheid South Africa.

Historical analysis

The historical analysis focuses on the apartheid era and the transition to democracy, utilising primary and secondary sources such as church records, government documents and previous scholarly works. This analysis helps understand the evolution of church involvement in social justice and poverty alleviation efforts.

Qualitative analysis

Because of the complex and multifaceted nature of the research topic, a qualitative analysis approach was chosen. This method provides an in-depth understanding of the social, theological and contextual factors influencing church involvement in poverty alleviation. The analysis draws on theoretical frameworks from missional ecclesiology and social justice literature, which inform the study's conclusions and recommendations.

Through this methodological approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the role of churches in addressing poverty in South Africa, spanning both historical and contemporary contexts.

Historical context of church engagement with poverty

The involvement of churches in addressing poverty in South Africa is deeply intertwined with the country's political and social developments. To understand the current role of churches in poverty alleviation, it is essential to examine

their historical context, particularly during the apartheid era and the transition to democracy. This period laid the foundation for the missional ecclesiology approach that would later shape church-led poverty alleviation efforts (Baron & Maponya 2020:2).

During apartheid, the relationship between churches and poverty was closely linked to the broader struggle against racial segregation and oppression. The apartheid system, with its policies of racial discrimination and economic exclusion, was a primary driver of poverty among the non-white population (Bundy 2018:37; McGlinchey 2022:233; Seekings 2007:1–2). In this context, churches occupied various positions: while some actively opposed the apartheid regime, others tacitly or explicitly supported it (De Gruchy 2005:54; Modise 2018:5; Struby 2018:6). The divergent roles played by these churches highlight the evolving nature of missional ecclesiology, which emphasises a commitment to justice and societal transformation in line with Christian teachings (Thinane 2021:2).

Many churches, particularly those aligned with the liberation theology movement, played a crucial role in opposing apartheid and addressing its socio-economic consequences. Liberation theology's focus on social justice and empowering oppressed communities closely aligns with the principles of missional ecclesiology, which calls for active church involvement in societal transformation (Baron & Maponya 2020:3; Thinane 2021:4). The Anglican Church, under leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was at the forefront of this struggle, advocating for social justice, providing support to marginalised communities and challenging the theological justifications for apartheid (De Gruchy 2005:211; Villa-Vicencio 1992:102). The South African Council of Churches (SACC) was instrumental in the anti-apartheid movement, providing a model for church involvement in socio-economic transformation. The SACC's activities ranged from direct aid provision to high-level advocacy for policy changes, often in direct conflict with the apartheid government (Kim 2017:2; Klaasen & Solomons 2019:14). The SACC's adoption of a prophetic witness approach – a key element of missional ecclesiology – demonstrates its focus on advocating for systemic change to dismantle oppressive structures (Baron & Maponya 2020:6). This stance led to severe repercussions, including raids, detentions and violence against its personnel (Womack & Pillay 2019:3).

However, not all churches were aligned with the anti-apartheid movement. The Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), the largest Afrikaans-speaking denomination among white South Africans, notably supported apartheid policies for much of this period (Elphick 2012:300; Giliomee 2003:459). This stance significantly limited its engagement with broader social issues, including poverty alleviation, particularly among non-white communities. The NGK's theology, which provided religious justification for racial segregation, effectively restricted its ability to address the systemic causes of poverty that disproportionately affected black South Africans (Moodie 1975:250–252; Van der Riet & Van Wyngaard 2021:3;

Van der Westhuizen & Swart 2015:732). This theological position contrasted starkly with the principles of missional ecclesiology, which promotes the church's role as an agent of societal change and reconciliation (Thinane 2021:5).

The historical role of churches during apartheid thus reflects a complex interplay between theological convictions and socio-political realities. While some churches embraced a missional approach that sought to transform society through justice and advocacy, others remained bound by doctrines that reinforced the status quo. This dichotomy laid the groundwork for the post-apartheid evolution of missional ecclesiology, where the focus increasingly shifted towards a holistic mission integrating spiritual guidance with social and economic justice initiatives (Baron & Maponya 2020:6).

The role of churches in contemporary poverty alleviation efforts

In contemporary South Africa, churches play a significant role in poverty alleviation efforts. Building on the foundations laid during the apartheid and post-apartheid eras, the principles of missional ecclesiology have become more pronounced in guiding church-led initiatives towards societal transformation. However, the landscape of church involvement has evolved significantly since the end of apartheid, reflecting changes in the socio-economic context, shifts in theological perspectives and the emergence of new challenges and opportunities.

One of the most notable developments in contemporary church-led poverty alleviation is the adoption of more holistic approaches by many churches. Recognising the multifaceted nature of poverty, these churches have moved beyond traditional charity models to implement programmes that integrate spiritual, social and economic support (Adams 2007:34–35; Kgatle 2017:6–7; Mokgotho 2014:17; Shunmugam 2024:2). This shift towards a holistic mission directly reflects missional ecclesiology's emphasis on addressing not just the symptoms of poverty but also its structural and systemic causes (Niemandt 2014:8). This approach often focuses on building community self-reliance through initiatives such as job training, microfinance programmes, education support and skills development.

For instance, the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in South Africa has implemented various community development initiatives to alleviate poverty among marginalised populations. These initiatives include skills training programmes, food distribution and health awareness campaigns targeting unemployed individuals, single-parent households and youth at risk of social exclusion. The AFM's approach is grounded in missional ecclesiology principles, emphasising a spiritual and material well-being commitment. Notably, over 1500 individuals have participated in these skills training programmes, resulting in a 60% employment rate among graduates within 6 months of completion (Kgatle 2017:3, 6).

For example, some megachurches in urban areas have established comprehensive poverty alleviation programmes that combine spiritual guidance with practical assistance. These programmes might include job placement services, financial literacy workshops and entrepreneurship training (Adams 2007:37–38; Icheku 2006:45; Mangayi 2014:140). This integrative approach aligns with the missional ecclesiology perspective, which advocates for equipping individuals and communities to actively participate in their development rather than being passive recipients of aid (Myers 2011:123). The aim is not just to provide immediate relief but to equip individuals and communities with the tools and knowledge necessary to break the cycle of poverty.

Similarly, the NGK has engaged in justice and solidarity initiatives, including food banks, educational support for children and advocacy for social justice policies. These efforts are rooted in the church's missional commitment to act as a prophetic voice in society, advocating for systemic change and challenging socio-economic inequalities. Impact assessments indicate that the NGK's initiatives reach over 10000 individuals annually, providing crucial support to needy families and fostering greater community engagement in advocacy efforts (Botha & Forster 2017:2,4).

Additionally, many churches have recognised the importance of addressing the structural causes of poverty. This has increased involvement in advocacy efforts to influence public policy and promote social justice. Church leaders and faith-based organisations have become vocal advocates on issues such as income inequality, access to education and land reform (Joda-Mbewe 2002:62; Kgatle 2017:7; Kim 2017:64; Shunmugam 2024:4). The prophetic witness aspect of missional ecclesiology empowers churches to leverage their moral authority and community influence to push for systemic changes, challenging societal structures that perpetuate inequality and poverty (Brueggemann 2001:3; Gutiérrez 1988:116). They often leverage their moral authority and community influence to push for systemic changes that address the root causes of poverty (Mangayi 2014:142).

Challenges and opportunities in contemporary church-led poverty alleviation

The role of churches in poverty alleviation has evolved significantly in recent years, with many adopting more holistic approaches to address this complex issue. However, the effectiveness of these efforts varies widely across different contexts, revealing both the potential and limitations of church-led initiatives in combating poverty. This evolution has been shaped by the principles of missional ecclesiology, emphasising a comprehensive approach that addresses both spiritual and socio-economic dimensions of poverty.

At the heart of this variation lies the diverse theological orientations of churches, which profoundly shape their approach to poverty alleviation. While some churches view

poverty primarily through a spiritual lens, focusing on individual transformation, others embrace a social gospel approach that emphasises structural change (Aspiranti, Amaliah & Shaharuddin 2023:354,356; Bowers du Toit 2017:2; Kgatle 2017:10–11). This diversity in theological perspectives can be seen as both a strength and a challenge within the framework of missional ecclesiology, which seeks to unify these approaches towards a holistic mission focused on justice and transformation. While enriching the overall discourse on poverty, this theological diversity often leads to fragmented and inconsistent strategies across the religious landscape.

The stark reality of resource disparity further compounds this issue. Larger, well-established urban churches typically wield considerable resources, enabling them to implement comprehensive programmes. In contrast, smaller churches in impoverished communities often struggle to provide basic assistance (Adams 2007:42; Mokgotho 2014:22; Hamad 2012:74; Khariseb 2001:73). This resource gap limits the reach of poverty alleviation efforts and perpetuates a cycle where the most impoverished communities remain underserved (Hamad 2012:80). Missional ecclesiology encourages resource-sharing and collaborative partnerships to bridge these gaps, yet practical implementation remains challenging because of existing socio-economic disparities.

For example, the NGK's Food Security Initiative focuses on creating community gardens and food distribution networks in rural areas, particularly in the Free State province. This initiative has successfully established over 50 community gardens and has directly benefited approximately 5000 individuals by improving food availability and reducing reliance on external food aid (Beukes & Plaatjies van Huffel 2016:229; Cloete 2015:522; Naicker & Molobi 2022:3).

The urban–rural divide exacerbates these disparities. Urban churches, benefiting from greater access to resources and networks, can often implement more sophisticated interventions. Rural churches, while potentially closer to the realities of poverty, frequently lack the means to effect large-scale change (Cnaan & Curtis 2013:10; Joda-Mbewe 2002:53–55; Mangayi 2014:145; Shunmugam 2024:7). Missional ecclesiology's emphasis on contextual engagement calls for churches to tailor their poverty alleviation efforts to the specific needs of their communities, recognising the unique challenges rural areas face.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa's Educational Outreach programme is another example of a targeted initiative providing after-school tutoring and mentorship for underprivileged children in the Eastern Cape. This programme has significantly improved literacy rates among participants, with a 40% increase reported among enrolled children (Van der Merwe 2020:2).

Denominational differences further fragment the landscape of church-led poverty alleviation. The varying levels of centralised organisation and resource pooling among denominations lead

to inconsistent capabilities in coordinating and sustaining poverty alleviation efforts. While some denominations boast well-established, nationwide programmes, others operate on a more localised, independent basis (Bowers du Toit 2017:4; Kakwata 2020:113–115; Kgatle 2017:13; Mokgotho 2014:17–19). The principles of missional ecclesiology advocate for a united mission that transcends denominational boundaries, aiming to create a more cohesive approach to combating systemic poverty.

Moreover, many churches struggle to balance immediate relief and long-term development, which can lead to unintended negative consequences. Despite the shift towards more holistic approaches, a significant number still focus primarily on addressing the immediate symptoms of poverty rather than its root causes (Adams 2007:44; Fikkert & Kapic 2019; Mokgotho 2014:25; Scott & Cnaan 2017:392). While providing necessary relief, this short-term focus often fails to break the cycle of poverty and can inadvertently create dependency. Furthermore, church-led initiatives may sometimes conflict with local cultural practices or exacerbate social divisions, particularly when resources are distributed unevenly within communities. There is also a risk that some churches may use poverty alleviation programmes as a means of proselytisation, which can raise ethical concerns and potentially alienate non-Christian community members. Additionally, the lack of professional expertise in development work among some church leaders may result in well-intentioned but ineffective or even harmful interventions. Missional ecclesiology, emphasising sustainable development and empowerment, challenges churches to shift their focus from temporary relief to transformative, long-term strategies that build community resilience. However, implementing this approach requires careful consideration of potential negative impacts and a commitment to addressing these challenges through culturally sensitive, inclusive and ethically sound practices.

The challenge of measuring the impact further complicates the landscape of church-led poverty alleviation. Many initiatives lack robust evaluation systems, making it difficult to assess their effectiveness and make data-driven improvements (Beukes 2019:4–5; Hamad 2012:72; Mangayi 2014:147; Shunmugam 2024:9). Adopting a missional approach requires churches to develop more rigorous evaluation frameworks that can track the impact of their initiatives and inform continuous improvement.

Finally, the varying degrees of political engagement among churches add another layer of complexity to their poverty alleviation efforts. While some churches actively participate in public discourse and advocate for policy changes, others prefer to focus solely on direct service provision (Bowers du Toit 2017:2; Bowers du Toit & August 2004:419; Kgatle 2017:16; Klaasen & Solomons 2019:10). Missional ecclesiology encourages churches to act as prophetic voices in society, advocating for justice and challenging systems perpetuating poverty and inequality.

Missional ecclesiology: A way forward for churches in addressing poverty

Despite these challenges, a promising path emerges through adopting missional ecclesiology. This approach provides a robust framework for enhancing churches' role in addressing poverty, particularly in South Africa. Missional ecclesiology, which emphasises the church's participation in God's mission to the world, offers a theological and practical foundation for a more comprehensive and transformative engagement with social issues, including poverty.

The strength of missional ecclesiology lies in its holistic understanding of mission, integrating spiritual, social and material dimensions of human existence. This aligns seamlessly with comprehensive approaches to poverty alleviation that address multiple aspects of deprivation (Kalu 2007:135; Niemandt 2010:399, 2014:8; Wright 2006:268). This holistic perspective is central to the effectiveness of church-led initiatives, guiding them towards strategies that tackle poverty's immediate needs and underlying causes.

For example, the AFM in South Africa has implemented various community development initiatives to alleviate poverty among marginalised populations. These initiatives include skills training programmes, food distribution and health awareness campaigns that target low-income families in urban and rural areas. This practical approach aligns with missional ecclesiology's emphasis on holistic salvation, integrating spiritual growth with tangible socio-economic support (Kgatle 2017:3). The AFM's efforts have resulted in over 1500 individuals participating in these programmes, with a reported 60% employment rate among graduates within six months of completion, highlighting a significant impact on poverty alleviation (Kgatle 2017:6).

Central to missional ecclesiology is its emphasis on contextual engagement. This approach calls for deep immersion in local contexts, urging churches to understand and respond to the specific manifestations of poverty in their communities (Bevans 2002:3; Dreyer 2020:250; Kakwata 2020:105; Niemandt 2014:8). By prioritising contextual sensitivity, churches can design interventions that are directly relevant to the socio-economic realities of their communities, enhancing the impact of their poverty alleviation efforts.

Similarly, the NGK has developed justice and solidarity initiatives that address socio-economic inequalities in South Africa. The NGK's operational approach includes community outreach programmes, such as food banks and educational support, aiming to meet immediate needs and long-term development goals (Botha & Forster 2017:2). By embedding these efforts within a framework of missional ecclesiology, the NGK has positioned itself as a prophetic voice advocating for systemic change and promoting social justice, essential to sustainable poverty alleviation (Baron & Maponya 2020:2).

Furthermore, missional approaches prioritise empowerment and participation, encouraging communities and individuals to be active participants in their development rather than passive recipients of aid (Chambers 1997; Mokgotho 2014:36; Myers 2011:123; Niemandt 2010:401, 2014:8). This shift from dependency to empowerment reflects a core principle of missional ecclesiology, aiming to build sustainable solutions that foster local leadership and resilience.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa exemplifies this through its youth empowerment programmes, which focus on entrepreneurship training and mentorship. These initiatives have engaged over 2000 young people, with 70% of participants starting their businesses within a year of completing the training (Forster 2015:4). This approach provides economic opportunities and aligns with missional ecclesiology's goal of fostering active community participation and long-term self-sufficiency.

The prophetic witness emphasised in missional ecclesiology provides churches with a powerful tool for addressing systemic issues. By calling for justice and challenging structures that perpetuate poverty and inequality, churches can contribute to broader societal change (Brueggemann 2001:40; Dreyer 2020:253; Gutiérrez 1988:116; Kakwata 2020:114–115; Niemandt 2014:8). This prophetic stance is essential in advocating for systemic reforms and tackling the deep-rooted issues contributing to South Africa's poverty.

An illustrative example is the Anglican Church's food security programmes, which aim to combat hunger and malnutrition in vulnerable communities. The church supports sustainable agriculture by establishing community gardens and food distribution networks. It provides immediate food relief to those in need, aligning its mission with the broader goals of social justice and community resilience (Baron & Pali 2021:7).

Missional ecclesiology also encourages collaborative partnerships, recognising that addressing complex issues like poverty requires concerted efforts from multiple stakeholders (Korten 1990:95; Sheridan 2012:141; Sider, Olson & Unruh 2002:89; Niemandt 2010:405, 2014:8). By building alliances with government entities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local communities, churches can amplify their impact, leading to more effective and sustainable poverty alleviation strategies.

However, adopting missional ecclesiology is challenging, and its implementation may introduce new complexities and potential pitfalls. Theological resistance may arise from churches whose traditions emphasise individual salvation over social engagement, potentially leading to internal conflicts and fragmentation within congregations (Bowers du Toit 2017:3). Resource constraints, particularly among smaller congregations, may limit the implementation of comprehensive, long-term strategies, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities between well-resourced urban churches

and their less affluent rural counterparts (Adams 2007:41; Mokgotho 2014:22). Moreover, the shift towards a more socially engaged theology may inadvertently lead to neglecting spiritual aspects of ministry, risking a loss of religious identity and purpose. There is also a danger that churches adopting missional ecclesiology may overestimate their capacity to effect social change, potentially undermining or duplicating the efforts of more experienced development organisations. Additionally, the increased involvement of churches in socio-economic issues may blur the lines between religious institutions and civil society organisations, raising questions about the appropriate role of religious bodies in public life. Addressing these challenges requires significant training, capacity-building investments and careful consideration of the ethical implications and potential unintended consequences of church involvement in complex social issues.

Balancing spiritual ministry with increased social engagement presents another hurdle, as some may fear that an enhanced focus on poverty alleviation might detract from traditional church functions (Kgatle 2017:9). Political sensitivities also come into play, as deeper engagement with systemic issues may lead churches into contentious debates, potentially causing tension within congregations or with government authorities (Bowers du Toit 2017:5; Kgatle 2017:16). Navigating these complexities requires a nuanced approach that integrates spiritual and social mandates while focusing on transformative change.

Cultural and contextual adaptations present both a challenge and an opportunity. Applying missional ecclesiology in diverse South African contexts requires careful cultural adaptation (Bevans 2002:18; Kakwata 2020:112), and this process can lead to more relevant and effective interventions. Additionally, the long-term nature of transformative approaches to poverty alleviation can make it challenging to demonstrate impact, potentially affecting support and funding for such initiatives (Mangayi 2014:147; Shunmugam 2024:9).

Despite these challenges, the opportunities presented by missional ecclesiology are significant, though they must be approached with caution and critical reflection. Churches can leverage their extensive community networks and social capital to effectively mobilise resources and support for poverty alleviation initiatives (Lockhart 2005:45). However, this potential influence raises concerns about the appropriate boundaries between religious institutions and civil society and the risk of religious organisations wielding disproportionate power in community development. By embracing a missional approach, churches can integrate their spiritual, social and economic initiatives, potentially fostering a more comprehensive and sustainable community development model. Yet, this integration may also lead to the conflation of religious and development objectives, potentially compromising the neutrality and inclusivity of poverty alleviation efforts. Furthermore, while churches'

embeddedness in communities can facilitate grassroots engagement, it may also reinforce existing power structures and social hierarchies, potentially excluding marginalised groups or perpetuating inequalities. Implementing missional ecclesiology in poverty alleviation thus requires a delicate balance between harnessing the unique strengths of religious institutions and maintaining ethical, inclusive and professionally sound development practices.

Churches' moral authority and community presence uniquely position them to advocate for policy changes that address systemic causes of poverty (Kgatle 2017:8; Shunmugam 2024:4). The missional approach encourages creative, context-specific solutions, potentially leading to innovative poverty alleviation models (Adams 2007:36; Mangayi 2014:144). Moreover, churches can leverage their multigenerational membership to create poverty alleviation programmes that benefit from diverse perspectives and skills (Mokgotho 2014:17).

By facilitating stronger partnerships with government agencies, NGOs and businesses, a missional focus can lead to more comprehensive and effective interventions (Kgatle 2017:11; Mokgotho 2014:20). This approach also enables churches to address the root causes of poverty, not just its symptoms (Msiza 2021:3; Swart 2008:104). The emphasis on developing local leadership can potentially create a new generation of community development leaders (Niemandt 2010:401, 2014:8).

Perhaps most crucially in the South African context, churches can play a vital role in fostering reconciliation and social cohesion alongside poverty alleviation, addressing the social fragmentation that often accompanies economic inequality (Bhorat & Van der Westhuizen 2012:20–21; Msiza 2021:4). This holistic approach to community transformation, rooted in missional ecclesiology, offers a powerful way forward for churches seeking to make a lasting impact on poverty in South Africa.

Conclusion

The role of churches in addressing poverty in South Africa has been significant yet complex, shaped by historical contexts, theological perspectives and socio-economic realities. From the apartheid era to today, churches have demonstrated the potential to be powerful agents of change and the limitations that can hinder their effectiveness in combating poverty. This duality highlights the importance of aligning church efforts with a framework that emphasises holistic and transformative engagement, such as missional ecclesiology.

The historical analysis reveals a dichotomy in church involvement during apartheid. Some churches were at the forefront of the struggle against racial oppression and its attendant poverty, while others tacitly or explicitly supported the system. This historical context has profoundly influenced

contemporary church engagement with poverty alleviation, creating a legacy that continues to shape approaches and attitudes. Understanding these historical dynamics is essential for developing more effective church-led strategies rooted in justice and reconciliation.

In the post-apartheid era, churches have increasingly adopted more holistic approaches to poverty alleviation, recognising the multifaceted nature of poverty and the need for comprehensive solutions. However, this shift has been accompanied by significant challenges. The diversity in theological orientations, resource disparities between urban and rural churches, denominational differences and the struggle to balance immediate relief with long-term development have all contributed to a fragmented landscape of church-led poverty alleviation efforts. Missional ecclesiology provides a guiding framework that can help unify these diverse efforts by encouraging a shared commitment to holistic mission and community empowerment.

For example, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa has implemented mentorship programmes that engage older congregants in guiding young members towards skills development and career planning, resulting in a 70% employment rate among participants (Forster 2015:7). This initiative demonstrates the church's commitment to addressing poverty through charity and empowering individuals with the skills and opportunities needed for sustainable development.

Despite these challenges, churches remain uniquely positioned to contribute to poverty alleviation in South Africa. Their extensive community networks, moral authority and ability to mobilise resources offer significant potential for impactful interventions (Joda-Mbewe 2002:75). Moreover, their capacity to address poverty's spiritual and material dimensions provides a holistic approach that few other institutions can match. This dual focus on spiritual and social transformation is at the heart of missional ecclesiology, which advocates for addressing the immediate needs and the underlying causes of poverty.

The AFM's contextual engagement in urban and rural communities has led to targeted initiatives, such as city entrepreneurship training and agricultural development projects in rural areas, benefiting over 3000 individuals annually (Kgatle 2017:6). These examples highlight how churches can design interventions relevant to their specific socio-economic contexts, enhancing their impact on poverty alleviation.

Adopting a missional ecclesiology framework emerges as a promising way to enhance the effectiveness of church-led poverty alleviation efforts. This approach, emphasising holistic mission, contextual engagement, empowerment, prophetic witness and collaborative partnerships, aligns well with the complex demands of addressing poverty in

South Africa. By embracing missional ecclesiology, churches can move beyond traditional models of charity towards more transformative and sustainable approaches that address poverty's symptoms and root causes.

However, implementing missional ecclesiology is not without its challenges. Churches must navigate theological resistance, resource constraints, capacity-building needs and political sensitivities. They must also grapple with the complexities of cultural adaptation and the difficulties of measuring long-term impact. Overcoming these challenges will require sustained commitment, innovative thinking and a willingness to engage in critical self-reflection and adaptation. Missional ecclesiology encourages this kind of adaptability, urging churches to continually evolve in response to the changing needs of their communities.

The potential impact of church-led poverty alleviation efforts in South Africa is significant. By leveraging their unique strengths and adopting more comprehensive, context-sensitive approaches, churches can play a crucial role in addressing economic poverty and the social fragmentation and inequality in South African society. Integrating poverty alleviation with reconciliation and social cohesion initiatives offers a powerful avenue for churches to contribute to holistic community transformation. This integration is a key tenet of missional ecclesiology, which sees the church's role not just as a provider of services but as a catalyst for deep, systemic change.

The NGK's advocacy for policy reforms, particularly in educational and land reform areas, has already led to legislative changes to reduce socio-economic inequalities in South Africa (Botha & Forster 2017:4). This is a clear example of how churches, by leveraging their moral authority, can influence systemic changes beyond immediate community needs, thereby significantly impacting societal issues.

As South Africa continues to grapple with the persistent challenge of poverty, the role of churches in this struggle remains vital. Churches can significantly enhance their effectiveness in poverty alleviation by learning from historical experiences, addressing current challenges and embracing innovative approaches like missional ecclesiology. This, in turn, has the potential to impact the lives of millions of South Africans, contributing significantly to the broader national goal of creating a more equitable and prosperous society for all.

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Authors' contributions

C.B.P. conceived the study, conducted the literature review, analysed and interpreted the findings and wrote the initial manuscript draft. W.A.D. guided the study design, reviewed

the manuscript drafts critically and contributed to the final version. Both authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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Ethical considerations

Based on a literature review and analysis of existing public data, this research received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria. While the research did not directly involve human participants or animals, ethical clearance was obtained to ensure compliance with institutional research standards. The ethical clearance number is T090/22, approved on 23 June 2023.

Data availability

This study is based on an analysis of publicly available literature and data. No new data were created or analysed in this study. The articles and sources used in this review are listed in the references section. Any additional information or clarification regarding the data used in this study is available from the corresponding author, C.P.B., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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