


# Church partnerships: A holistic approach to addressing social issues in South Africa

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For South African communities to achieve substantive progress, the establishment of strategic partnerships is essential for effectively addressing their complex social challenges. Churches, given their profound community presence and moral authority, are urged to join forces with other societal sectors, particularly government and business, to promote comprehensive community development. This article examines the potential for church partnerships with these sectors, investigating how such alliances can foster sustainable and holistic transformation. Central questions driving this inquiry include: What distinct contributions do churches bring to community development partnerships? and how can these partnerships efficiently combine their resources to tackle social, economic, and environmental issues? By assessing the role of the church alongside governmental frameworks and business resources, this study underscores the importance of an integrated approach to development. The church's involvement not only provides essential support to vulnerable groups but also contributes strategically to the long-term empowerment of communities. This article ultimately underscores the need for combined engagement, demonstrating how a unified approach can amplify the collective impact on social well-being and resilience within South Africa. By highlighting the theological and organisational identities of churches, alongside the distinct capital and power each entity holds, the article seeks to identify common grounds for cooperation, with a particular focus on the church's capacity to exert positive, morally guided influence within these partnerships.

**Contribution:** The article highlights the significance of a holistic approach that utilises the strengths of churches, businesses and the government to boost social development in South Africa, thereby contributing to community development pathways.

**Keywords:** partnership; church; social issues; South Africa; holistic; community development.

## Introduction

The urgency for church partnerships in addressing social challenges in South Africa has never been more critical (Francis 2008; Nanthambwe 2022; Sessa et al. 2020; Swart 2006a). The nation continues to face multifaceted socio-economic issues, including entrenched poverty, inequality, and insufficient access to fundamental services like quality education, healthcare, and adequate housing. Although governmental and non-profit efforts persist, the scale of these challenges calls for a collaborative approach across various societal sectors. Churches, with their distinct resources—moral authority, social influence, and extensive local networks—are strategically positioned to support and amplify other social initiatives, thereby contributing significantly to societal well-being.

As institutions embedded deeply within communities, churches hold the potential to drive meaningful grassroots change (Kariuki 2018; Magezi 2019; Nanthambwe & Magezi 2022). However, the scope of challenges in South Africa requires that the church not undertake community transformation alone. Nanthambwe's (2022) study underscores the critical role of partnerships between churches and other social entities, including businesses and government, to maximize impact in addressing these societal needs.

While the church has a fundamental responsibility to care for its communities, government and businesses also bear the responsibility to advance the public good (Asemah, Okpanachi & Edogoh 2013:49; Kariuki 2018; Nimani, Zeqiraj & Spahija 2022:315). Through partnerships, churches can combine resources, leverage expertise, and collaborate to create sustainable, impactful solutions to these complex issues (eds. Belshaw, Calderisi & Sugden 2001; Nanthambwe 2022).

All three principal entities – the church, businesses and government – contribute to the common good of society. Yet, their efforts are often insufficient to effectively address the multifaceted social challenges (Moldovan, Greenley & Lakatos 2016). Moldovan et al. (2016) hint at the following regarding the necessity of collaboration on corporate social responsibility (CSR):

... it has been argued that these companies have not been doing enough and that there are more efficient methods that can be conducted to improve the outlying communities. NGOs on the other hand are non-profit by nature and seek to help communities through development projects that improve the quality of life for those individuals living in problematic situations. NGOs are able to fulfil their operations through donations, project writing, members' dues, etc. As a result, many NGOs are unable to complete projects to the full extent that they desire due to a lack of funding. (p. 51)

This gap underscores the need for these entities to unify their efforts and support one another, aiming to tackle complex social issues through a coordinated approach. The church focusses on ethical values and social justice, businesses emphasise profits and economic performance and governments work to maintain peace and prosperity in society. Despite these differing priorities, a coordinated approach allows these entities to harmonise their roles. This collaborative effort is a key element for mutual understanding and helps reduce tensions that could lead to social or environmental injustices.

But why are the church, businesses and government in this collaboration? The tripartite collaboration of the church, business and government is justified in South Africa because of their historical significance, complementary strengths and the potential for effective, sustainable solutions to the country's social challenges (Mudimeli 2017:1). Their combined efforts can create a more cohesive and integrated approach to addressing the complex issues facing South African society today.

While the church, business and government in South Africa have fundamentally different objectives – spiritual and eschatological for the church, profit-oriented for businesses and politically focussed for governments – their collaboration is justified. By recognising and valuing their differences, they can create a synergistic approach that addresses social challenges holistically, ensuring that the pursuit of spiritual, economic and political goals contributes to the overall well-being of society. This tripartite collaboration has the potential to foster a more just, equitable and thriving South Africa.

This article explores several important questions: How can minimal cooperation between churches, businesses and governments be addressed to achieve the best partnership results? How can the church uphold a critical perspective towards business and government while also engaging in a shared stewardship role? Additionally, how can a profit-

driven business develop fair practices in collaboration with the church to maximise outcomes amid economic inequalities between capital owners and the impoverished? Finally, does the church's prophetic role place it in a position of both participation and oversight within these partnerships?

This article will examine the biblical mandate for the church, business and government, focussing on their individual and collective roles within partnerships. It will assess the strengths of these three entities regarding different forms of capital and power to find a common ground that fosters cooperation. Additionally, the article will explore how the church can uphold its sacred mission while positively influencing its partners. The article aims to highlight the potential for improved collaboration and mutual understanding among these key societal pillars by addressing these issues. It concludes by advocating for such partnerships in South Africa.

## The current social state and the need for church, business and government interventions in South Africa

What are the social issues in South Africa that necessitate collaboration among churches, businesses and the government? While South African communities grapple with many challenges, including social, political, economic and health-related issues, this article highlights those most detrimental to the country's social stability. According to the Government of South Africa (2017:1), the three primary challenges – inequality, poverty and unemployment, often called triple challenges – are crucial (Nanthambwe). In addition, gender-based violence (GBV) and racism are also identified as major social issues that require urgent attention (Government of South Africa 2017).

In a 1998 parliamentary address, former South African President Thabo Mbeki emphasised the country's division into two nations: a relatively affluent white minority with access to advanced infrastructure and a much larger, impoverished black majority living in underdeveloped conditions. Mbeki (1998) notes that South Africa had not sufficiently generated resources to improve the conditions of the black poor, instead relying on limited public funds (Kganyago 2018:5; Makgetla 2020:4; Stats SA 2019:2). Even 30 years after the end of apartheid, South Africa continues to experience significant inequality, ranking as one of the most unequal countries in the world (Statista 2024). According to Webster, Valodia and Francis (2017), the wealthiest 10% of the population controls 90% of the wealth and earns 60% of the national income. Despite efforts by the government since the democratic transition in 1994, inequality remains a persistent issue (Statista 2024; World Bank 2024).

Poverty is another critical issue that severely impacts many South Africans' lives (Nanthambwe 2022). According to the World Bank (2024), South Africa's economy is hindered by

various structural problems, including electricity shortages, transportation challenges (such as issues with ports and freight rail) and a high crime rate. Efforts to address these issues have been slow because of the state's decreasing capacity to implement reforms and a lack of political agreement. The social situation remains dire, with high poverty levels – estimated at 62.7% in 2023, based on the upper-middle-income poverty line – and some of the highest levels of inequality globally (World Bank 2024). Progress in providing basic services like water, electricity and waste collection has stalled. Since the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the risk of hunger has increased, with approximately 12.9% of the population facing food insecurity in 2022, despite increased social grants (World Bank 2024).

Unemployment has been a significant issue in the post-apartheid era. According to Stats SA (2024), the official unemployment rate stood at 32.9% in the first quarter of 2024. The Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) reported that the number of employed individuals increased by 22 000 to 16.7 million in the first quarter of 2024 compared to the fourth quarter of 2023. Meanwhile, the number of unemployed people rose by 330 000 to 8.2 million during the same period (Stats SA 2024). Kwenda, Ntuli and Mudiriza (2024) express concern over the persistently high unemployment rates, which vary significantly across different regions. They note that:

Regional unemployment disparities in South Africa are deeply rooted in historic racial discrimination policies. Race-based segregation that contributed to contemporary regional unemployment patterns ... (p. 166)

The statement shows the correlation between inequality, poverty, unemployment and racism in the country. These all contribute to systemic disparities that hinder social progress and create barriers to achieving a just and equitable society.

Gender-based violence remains one of the numerous challenges affecting South African communities (Nanthambwe & Magezi 2024; South African Government 2022). Both traditional and social media platforms widely discuss the widespread issue of GBV against women in South Africa (Oparinde et al. 2021:1). In the second quarter of 2023/2024, former Police Minister Bheki Cele revealed alarming crime statistics for the country (South African Government 2023). Over a 3-month period, South Africa reported 10 516 rape cases, 1 514 attempted murders and 14 401 assaults targeting women (South African Government 2023). Tragically, 881 women lost their lives during this time.

Govender's study (2023) demonstrates that racism remains a significant challenge for South African communities. Racism manifests as segregation and privilege, with people being separated and treated differently based on their skin colour. The study highlights the persistence of racism in various areas, including schools, the business and employment sectors and social media in South Africa. Although the African National Congress (ANC) government implemented

strong plans to uphold a democratic and free society for all South Africans after the end of apartheid and the establishment of a democratic government in 1994, the issue of race continues to be a serious problem. While there have been some improvements in racial relations, the harsh reality is that racism is still a prevalent issue in the country (Nanthambwe 2022:90).

South Africa's ongoing social challenges – such as inequality, poverty, unemployment, gender-based violence and racism – require a unified response from churches, businesses and the government. Tackling these complex issues demands not only the individual contributions of these sectors but also a coordinated, collaborative effort that harnesses their combined strengths. By joining forces, these key stakeholders can more effectively break down the systemic barriers that sustain inequality and injustice, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

## Roles of the church, businesses and governments in society

Examining the contributions of the church, businesses and the government to addressing social issues is crucial for understanding how these entities can collectively promote ethical practices and social welfare.

### The role of the church in addressing social issues

The key question is: What role does the church play in addressing social issues? The church's primary mission has often been examined. Deyoung and Gilbert (2011) articulate:

The mission of the church is to enter the world and make disciples by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit, gathering these disciples into churches to worship the Lord and follow his commands both now and forever for the glory of the Father. (pp. 62–63)

Deyoung and Gilbert (2011) note that the church has historically focussed on evangelism and nurturing people in Christ, as seen in the Book of Acts and the life of the apostle Paul. The synoptic gospels emphasise that the church's primary mission is to make disciples (Mk 16:16–20; Lk 24:46–48; Mt 28:18–20). Supporting this view, Hildreth (2018:55–63) argues that preaching, witnessing and making disciples of all nations are crucial tasks for the church.

However, some scholars have challenged the idea of excluding social engagement from the church's mission (Chester 2013:67–80; Sider 2010:27–28; Stearns 2009:181–189). Sider (2010:27–28) criticised the approach of limiting the gospel to merely personal salvation or forgiveness of sins, arguing that it neglects the broader message of God's kingdom. He advocated for a holistic understanding of the gospel, including preaching salvation and engaging in social issues.

This perspective highlights the significance of the church's role in social involvement. So, what is the church's role

exactly? It functions as a living community and an organised institution, addressing spiritual and practical needs while serving divine and human interests (Erickson 2013; Grudem 2010). The church operates in roles such as prophet, priest, king and servant (McGrath 2017). In its prophetic role, the church acts as a watchdog, ensuring businesses act responsibly and governments fulfil their duties to communities. It is also responsible for condemning actions that undermine social and environmental justice, such as bribery, extortion, corruption and pollution (Agang 2020).

The quest for justice is central to the church's mission in addressing social issues. The holy scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, provide foundational insights on this topic. For example, Israel's observance of the sabbatical and jubilee years benefitted the nation, its kingdom, the land, the animals and the overall sustenance of life. In contrast, failure to adhere to these practices led to severe judgement from God, the Creator and Owner of all, resulting in the loss of social benefits.

Today, the church upholds these divine principles and functions as a prophet, priest and advocate for social justice (Nkansah-Obrempong 2018). Van der Walt (2007:297) argues that the church's role should profoundly influence politics, government and socioeconomic matters. As such, the church's responsibilities inevitably include political, social and economic aspects, affecting both governmental and business sectors (Francis 2008). The church can foster societal stability by promoting a value system in this role. Without a shared understanding of core values, societal cohesion and cooperation would be impossible (Van der Walt 2007:297).

In South Africa, churches are regarded as the most trusted social institution by their members, outpacing other organisations in terms of public confidence (Magezi 2022; Nanthambwe 2022; Swart 2006b). This trust is supported by various surveys (Banda 2020). Swart (2006b:346–347) argues that churches and other faith-based organisations serve as catalysts for social change and development in post-apartheid South Africa. Consequently, churches play a crucial role in nation-building. Both the business sector and the government acknowledge the significant contributions of churches to social development, resulting in numerous formal partnerships with these institutions (Louw & Koegeleberg 2003). In addition to the South African Council of Churches (SACC), several other notable para-church organisations are acknowledged by the state, including the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRSAD), the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA), the National Religious Leaders Forum (NLRG) and the National Independent Council of South Africa (NICSA) (Lebusa 2023). These organisations utilise their networks, resources and expertise to foster positive change and enhance the development and well-being of communities throughout South Africa.

## The role of businesses in society

What is the role of businesses in addressing social issues? According to the International Organisation of Employers (IOE 2005):

Business has always recognized that it has an important role, alongside other actors, in the economic and social development of its communities. It is an integrated part of any society and is committed to operating in a responsible and sustainable manner. (p. 1)

What role do businesses play in society? Do corporate organisations have responsibilities? According to Otte (2009:87), the term 'responsibility' originates from the Latin word 'responsabilis', which means having the capacity to fulfil obligations and meet expectations. This prompts an intriguing question: how can companies be responsible to society if they lack consciousness? Is it possible for corporations to possess traits that make them accountable for their actions? French (1984) addresses these questions, concluding that reasons typically guide corporate actions. As a result, companies can indeed be held accountable for their actions (French 1984).

French (1984) contends that companies and their employees and managers embody a sense of responsibility. He employs concepts such as 'reason', 'desires', 'intentions' and 'decision-making' to emphasise the importance of individual character in promoting responsible behaviour within organisations. Otte (2009) adds that, legally, companies are treated as entities, which means they have societal responsibilities. Similarly, Pruzan (2008) raises thought-provoking questions about the societal obligations of corporations. He (Pruzan 2008) questions if a company can be responsible, why it should bear such responsibility, and whether companies can exhibit qualities like intuition, empathy and reflection. Pruzan (2008) suggests two main reasons for supporting corporate responsibility: firstly, companies are legal entities with judicial obligations (Otte 2009), and secondly, companies operate within a social network involving relationships with shareholders and stakeholders.

It is in the relationship with stakeholders that businesses have a role to play in society. What is this role? The IOE (2005) avers the following:

Businesses are the community at work, be they small, medium or large, and national or international in their scope. They reflect the views, social realities and rules of the wider communities in which they operate. Those members of society that come together to form a business do so for a specific purpose: to create goods and services to sell to their community – and maybe beyond – and, by doing so, to make a profit within the obligations set for them by society. This profit is crucial to a business: it is used as a return to investors, to invest in new technologies and new products, to meet the wage and career expectations of its employees, and to pay taxes and make other contributions to government as specified by legislation and regulation. In other words, without profit there is no business, and without business there is no wealth creation in society. (p. 3)

According to the IOE (2005), the role of business in society is to innovate and provide products and services, efficiently utilise resources to create value and conduct operations in a manner that is both profitable and accepted by society, ensuring that these actions are just, equitable and socially responsible.

### The role of government in society

How does the government contribute to society? Sessa et al. (2020), quoting the Catholic Catechism, assert the following:

Therefore, 'the responsibility for achieving the common good lies not only with individuals but also with the state, since the common good is the *raison d'être* of political authority'. Moreover, 'to ensure the common good, the government of each country has the specific task of harmonizing the various sectoral interests with justice'. This concept, brought back to the economic dimension, is to be added to the 'moral good' which considers economic efficiency and the promotion of a development in solidarity of humanity as two inseparable and no longer separable goals. (p. 24)

The government plays a pivotal role in shaping and advancing societies. As detailed in the National Development Plan (National Planning Commission 2012), the participation of the State and businesses' reliance on non-profit organisations for their corporate social investment activities suggests that the country's development sector is increasingly characterised by complex multi-sectoral linkages. These connections involve collaborations among the private sector, government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-focussed groups and organised labour (Dlamini 2022). This complex network emphasises the need for a coordinated approach, with various sectors working together to achieve sustainable development goals. It highlights the government's role in facilitating and supporting these partnerships to enhance societal well-being.

In a tripartite relationship, governments have a distinctive role. While the government employs many workers, it does not solely generate jobs. Magezi (2022) underscores the limitations of the roles of both the government and the church in addressing social issues, advocating for collaboration and inclusive dialogue between different church sectors and government entities. The study suggests that while the government seeks to create an environment that fosters effective stakeholder participation, including legislation affecting churches, some situations may surpass the church's capabilities or mandate, necessitating collaboration. Nkansah-Obrempong (2018) also emphasises the importance of broad consultation and partnerships between churches and the government to tackle societal challenges effectively. This includes recognising each sector's unique roles and capacities and ensuring that all voices are included in the policy-making process.

### The unique biblical mandate for churches in the tripartite relationship of churches, businesses and government

The three entities – church, business and government – are responsible for being stewards of society, with the church's role uniquely emphasised in the Bible (see Mt 5:13–16). Biblical stewardship begins with acknowledging that creation is the foundation of all life, affirming that God is the Creator and Owner of the universe and that everything belongs to him (Ps 24:1). Humanity acts as stewards of both people and creation. The notion of stewardship, which includes love for one's neighbour and care for the environment as part of God's creation, underpins the church's social responsibility.

What is the church's unique biblical mandate in society? This mandate is embodied in four Greek words representing different aspects of evangelism: *Kerygma*, *Koinonia*, *Leiturgia* and *Diakonia* (Conn 1982:35; Mutavhatsindi 2008). These elements together position the church as a vital and influential force in societal transformation.

According to Conn (1982:36), *Kerygma* refers to the apostolic proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ. This proclamation enables the church to grow, as highlighted in Acts 2:47, 'The Lord added to the church as many of those who believed the message'. However, from the inception of the Acts of the Apostles, *Kerygma* was always coupled with social responsibility towards the poor and needy. Conn (1982:16) describes this as 'giving them a cup of water in the name of the Lord'. Bosch (1991:511–512) argues that this holistic approach is the most effective way to carry out mission work.

Chester (2013) observes that social activism is a natural outcome of evangelism, can act as a bridge to evangelism and serves as its partner. This means that social action can occur before, during or after evangelism. The two are interconnected, with neither being complete without the other (Chester 2013). Additionally, through preaching, the church can fulfil its prophetic role by addressing societal issues and denouncing injustices and corruption. As a result, preaching acts as a catalyst for promoting ethical behaviour, aligning values, raising awareness, advocating for change and driving practical action within the framework of CSR.

Conn (1982:36) describes *Koinonia*, as communion by intimate participation. This was the culture of the early church (Ac 2:34–43). Communing meant that the church aimed to share God's love, care and mercies in emulating Jesus Christ in his service. Love towards one's neighbour manifested in *Koinonia*.

The scriptures use several illustrations to define the relationship between Christ and the church. Some of them are 'the flock' (Jn 10:16), 'the vine' (Jn 15), 'the bride' of Christ (Rv 21:2; Eph 5:25–32), 'God's house' (Heb 3:1–6), 'a new covenant' (Heb. 8:8–13) and 'the holy city, the new Jerusalem' (Rv 21:2). All these terms underscore the importance of *Koinonia* between God and his people, man to his fellow human being, and the created order.

*Koinonia*, as depicted in the New Testament, originates from the concept of sharing and having things in common, participating together and engaging in mutual accountability (Erickson 2013; Grudem 2010). This term is notably associated with sharing the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:16, 17). Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, believers enter into fellowship with God and with one another, sharing in the life and love of God (Jn 1 1:3). This type of fellowship, characterised by sharing, communing and acting together, is crucial for communities facing societal needs. This aspect of *koinonia* becomes tangible when individuals share their possessions, as seen in Acts 2:42–46, where it is noted that 'no one lacked among them'.

Labonte (1999:431) links *Koinonia* with social capital, where he eloquently defines it as:

... something going on out there' in people's day-to-day relationships, which is an important determinant of the quality of their lives, if not society's healthy functioning. It is the 'glue stuff' that binds individuals to groups, groups to organisations, citizens to societies. (p. 431)

This cohesion represents the essence of the church, embodying what is known as *Koinonia*. The concept of *Koinonia* inherently has the potential to foster the church's social responsibility and create favourable conditions for enhancing community support, particularly as a foundation for building social capital.

The concept of *leiturgia* involves the church's responsibility to represent, through human language, symbolism and rituals, a God who cannot be empirically defined or fully conveyed through human communication (Pamplany, Kochukarottu & Kakkaramatthil 2016). Pamplany et al. (2016) assert that in fulfilling this role, the church develops theologies that address the contemporary needs of society. They argue that *leiturgia* (liturgy) is the foundation for liberation, reconstruction, development, practical and public theologies. In *leiturgia*, God's concern for humanity, his crown of creation, is made tangible. Through the expression of *leiturgia*, churches see and care for societies in the way God values them.

The Greek word *diakonia* translates to serving or servanthood (Grudem 2010). Jesus came to Earth to serve (Lk 19:10). *Diakonia* represents the church's tangible response to social issues and injustices. In this regard, the church acts as a servant to the nation, God and its members, functioning as an agent of social stewardship. Thus, the church is tasked with being a means of service delivery. Webber (2021) asserts that *diakonia* is what defines the church's mission; without being a servant, the church lacks justification for its existence. In this light, Webber (2021) refers to the church as the 'servant church'. This understanding of evangelism further emphasises the church's obligation to assist the needy and the poor, making service an essential part of its mission. Therefore, *diakonia* creates new opportunities to combine faith with action to foster hope and justice in addressing human needs.

In the context of societies, these theological concepts – kerygma, *koinonia*, *leiturgia* and *diakonia* – provide a rich foundation for the church's engagement in society. They inspire believers to serve, worship, proclaim and build community while actively participating in God's mission to heal and reconcile the world.

### **What should South African churches do to harness the cooperation of churches, businesses and government in addressing social issues?**

The following four steps are essential for the church in South Africa to enhance collaboration with businesses and government in addressing social issues in the country.

Firstly, the church must have a voice in addressing the land issue in South Africa (Resane 2019). During apartheid, black churches were deprived of essential resources such as landownership, while white churches owned land and had access to opportunities that enabled partnerships and job creation. This historical disparity continues to impact resource distribution today. Apartheid-era ethics greatly hindered efforts to promote equity. Although the new democratic government implemented Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) policies, these measures are still insufficient to address the imbalances fully. Many white churches continue to own substantial land, leasing these assets to the government and businesses. Addressing inequalities through stewardship and ethical land ownership is crucial. The principles of the common good and Christian ethics, shared by both religious and secular traditions, are vital in tackling modern social divisions, whether urban or global. Moral philosophy and biblical ethics provide common ground for addressing the growing divide between the rich and poor. The challenges posed by globalisation require a renewed commitment to the common good. Cooperation among the church, government and business is essential to improving lives both in cities and globally. In South Africa, one of the most unequal societies in the world, the church should collaborate with the government to find ways to address the land issue (Resane 2019). This would enhance the church's ability to contribute to addressing social issues like poverty in South Africa (Resane 2019).

Secondly, it is crucial to develop a shared language for social involvement in the 21st century. Moldovan et al. (2016) note that churches, businesses and the government each practice social responsibility in different ways – churches through community care, businesses through corporate social investments and governments through social contracts. Historically, they have used different terminologies for similar activities. Today, it is important to establish common ground where these entities can work together effectively. This requires creating a mutual understanding and interpretation of social responsibility concepts without necessitating that businesses use religious language or that churches adopt business jargon. A unified approach to these concepts would benefit all parties.

The unique roles of each entity emphasise the importance of partnerships and shared responsibility in addressing community issues. For instance, the church cannot provide social security or grants to all 19 million impoverished individuals in South Africa, nor to the over 27 million people currently receiving the R350 COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grants (Daily Investor 2023). This responsibility falls to government institutions like the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA). The church contributes in other ways, such as fostering moral integrity in society and enhancing emotional intelligence, which aids in human capital development. While the church can function as an employer (Saldanha 2022) and as an agent of community development (Nanthambwe 2022; Öhlmann, Frost & Gräb 2016), its capacity to create jobs is limited. Businesses play a crucial role in supporting the church by providing many of the services required by both the church and the government. While companies can employ psychologists and wellness practitioners to support their employees, only the church can effectively provide qualified chaplains, pastors and spiritual caregivers, who are essential for delivering comprehensive spiritual care.

The government has the authority to formulate policies that regulate citizens' behaviour and generate social fund revenue through taxes. There is still ongoing debate about whether the government should regulate the church and, if so, to what extent.

All three stakeholders – government, business and church – have distinct roles and callings. They utilise different types of capital to achieve their social responsibility goals. While businesses and governments possess more physical capital and political power, the church is rich in social capital. Churches often use theological terms such as offering, stewardship, giving and ethics, which in the business world translate to philanthropy, corporate citizenship and social investment, and in government terms, as the people's social contract. Essentially, they refer to the same practices. Pastors can be seen as community investors, comparable to Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of companies. They hold significant social capital and, therefore, should be regarded similarly to CEOs in business or to Premiers or Chief Directors in government language.

Thirdly, the church plays a crucial role in creating and strengthening partnerships among various stakeholders to address social issues in the country. Swart (2006b) emphasises the importance of churches collaborating with the government and other non-profit organisations to tackle the challenges facing people in South Africa. This need is still evident in 2024 when meaningful relationships among churches, business leaders and the government are essential for effective community development (Nanthambwe 2022). But how can these relationships be developed?

To begin with, there must be a structured platform for engagement among these three stakeholders. Through these interactions, the parties can cultivate mature identities and

practice virtues that encourage businesses to adopt more thoughtful and ethical approaches to promoting people's development. These engagements can take various forms, such as joint workshops, discussion forums and collaborative community projects. By creating spaces where business leaders, Christian communities and government officials can exchange ideas and perspectives, a deeper understanding and mutual respect can be fostered. This shared learning can lead to the development of business practices that are both profitable and socially and ethically responsible.

Additionally, these relationships can help bridge the gap between spiritual values and business ethics. Christian communities can provide moral guidance and support to managers, assisting them in navigating ethical dilemmas and making decisions aligned with their values. In return, managers can offer insights into the business world, helping Christian communities understand the challenges and opportunities in the marketplace. The government, within these collaborative spaces, can facilitate a conducive environment for all stakeholders to fulfil their roles effectively. By empowering community voices through appropriate legislation, the government can enable stakeholders to operate at their maximum potential.

Fourthly, the church should embrace public theology as a practical ministry to address the challenges faced by people in South Africa. Public theology extends the scope of theology beyond Christian traditions to tackle social, political and environmental issues (Dreyer 2004). Unlike traditional church theology, which often focusses inwardly, public theology emphasises engagement with public matters (Smit 2017). This approach enables churches to have a more significant impact on societal issues (Nanthambwe 2022; Otte 2009). Public theology is not limited to isolated worship spaces, academic institutions or theological societies. Instead, it is active and dynamic, engaging openly with society and encouraging widespread participation. This form of theology moves beyond internal discussions, reaching out to individuals in public spaces such as streets, markets and other community areas (Nanthambwe 2024). The goals of the Unit for Reformational Theology and Development of South African Society (URTDSAS n.d.) illustrate this approach:

... public theology is not institutionalized theology but it is theology that seeks discourse with social situations and human contexts. Public theology is not a replacement or rebranding of practical theology. Rather, practical theology finds its expression in public theology. Public theology facilitates dialogue between the theological discourses and overlaps with ecclesial and contextual theologies. The focus on Public Practical Theology is to encourage theology and the church to reflect and engage with key social issues. (n.p.)

According to the URTDSAS, public theology actively integrates dialogue with social situations and human contexts into its mission. It emphasises applying theological principles to real-world issues, expanding its reach beyond religious institutions into broader society (Nanthambwe 2024). This approach encourages churches and Christian communities to directly

engage with social, political and environmental challenges, advocating for ethical practices and social justice. By incorporating these principles into its framework, public theology encourages businesses and organisations to consider their societal and environmental impacts, fostering responsible and sustainable practices. This engagement goes beyond theoretical discussions and is realised through practical actions and initiatives that address community needs. Public theology, therefore, connects faith-based values with the ethical demands of modern society, fostering a culture of accountability and care for the common good (Beyers 2017; Fourie 2012). In essence, public theology's support underscores its commitment to holistic ministry, where faith and action come together to drive positive societal change. This commitment motivates faith communities to lead by example, demonstrating how religious beliefs can guide and inspire efforts to build more equitable and sustainable communities (Magezi 2019).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the collaboration between churches, businesses and governments is crucial for addressing societal challenges in South Africa. Despite their shared interests in promoting social justice, environmental stewardship and community well-being, these entities face challenges in working together because of differing languages and objectives. Churches are guided by biblical principles, businesses focus on profitability and community impact and governments aim to maintain stability. This article has explored ways to bridge these gaps, facilitating effective cooperation while preserving each entity's distinct role and values. By examining the unique strengths and forms of capital each stakeholder brings, particularly the church's prophetic role in guiding ethical practices, this study highlights potential pathways for successful partnerships. The goal is to foster a collaborative environment where theological insights, corporate practices and political objectives align to achieve more equitable and sustainable social outcomes.

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### Author's contribution

P.N. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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