

Extravagance amidst Extreme Poverty? A Focus on ‘New Religious Movements’ within the Development Discourse in Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

During the early 80s, Zimbabwe witnessed a rapid growth of the Third Wave Religious Right Movement (TWRRM),¹ commonly known as New Religious Movements (NRMs). These movements pride themselves on the premise that the gospel of prosperity is its central maxim. The article investigates the theological and developmental contribution of the gospel of prosperity towards its adherents' existential necessities and needs. It is on this premise that these churches have registered considerable success and popularity. This article thus seeks to provide empirical evidence on the contribution of three Charismatic churches and specifically highlight the benefits produced by this type of ‘gospel’ to the basic existential needs of Zimbabweans. The article will further explore whether or not this type of ‘gospel’ contributes to community development. In exploring the contributions of the gospel of prosperity and community development, the study will use a phenomenological approach by E. Husserl as a framework.

Keywords: Community Development; Entrepreneurship; Gospel of Prosperity; New

- 1 The term means fundamentalist independent groups which often consider themselves as ‘Bible Christians, born again and charismatic, not as Pentecostals (Kalu 2008, 8). The third wave implies there was the first wave, which was the missionary evangelicalism of the 19th century. The second wave of response was in the 1920s with a “pneumatic challenge with white theology” (Kalu 2008: 8, Mpofu 2014). This African initiative in Christianity thrived on communality and incorporation of facets of primal religion and culture (Ethiopianism and Zionism). The third wave of response gave birth to charismatic Christianity, a movement of revival and renewal, a third response to white cultural domination and power (Anderson 2001). This third wave differs from Pentecostals, deriving from Pentecost with a focus on the gift of the holy spirit. Founders or pastors of this third response are central to lifestyle choices based on religious discourse. The founder leader is understood as the voice and message of God.

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Religious Movements; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

This article examines the NRMs or Charismatic churches' contribution to community development. Sundkler and Steed (2000, 812) noted that, during 1982, with the mushrooming of new religious movements and the Ethiopian-type churches, which Daneel (1987, 50) speaks of, there were more than 120 independent denominations in Zimbabwe. In my personal experience, post-2000, Zimbabwe witnessed a dilapidating economic crisis characterised by high inflation, unemployment, food shortages and hardship. Once seen as economically vibrant, Zimbabwe virtually collapsed as political instability, lawlessness, misgovernment, corruption, and a relentless economic meltdown negatively transformed this country into an international pariah (Mlambo and Raftopoulos 2010, 1). This led to extreme poverty, making Zimbabwe one of the poorest countries in Africa.

Within this context of poverty and crisis, an advanced mushrooming of NRMs in Zimbabwe was witnessed. This clearly shows that poverty and crisis created a fertile ground for NRMs with their preaching of the gospel of prosperity². One would wonder if this prosperity gospel provided practical benefits to church adherents. Some studies clearly show that many people have accepted the gospel of prosperity, while others view it as only appealing to the rich (Gifford 1990, 2). Togarasei (2011, 343) pointed out that the prosperity gospel appeals more to those aspiring to be rich, thereby insulting the poor. Other scholars criticised the prosperity theology as an impetus for delusion, individualism, hogwash, wicked, heretical and damaging (Dada 2004, 95–105; Mackay, 2009 and Jones, 1998). The NRMs have contributed to the community's needs despite various negative criticisms. This paper then seeks to review the developmental contributions of three NRMs (New Life Covenant Church, United Family International Church and Celebration Ministries) to various communities in Zimbabwe and question whether these churches have contributed to community development. The article is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the methodology, the second section outlines the origins of TWRRM from the USA to Zimbabwe, its characteristics, and the theology of the gospel of prosperity. Section three looks at the concept of community development and the contribution the selected NRMs have made towards various communities in Zimbabwe. Section four questions the nature of community development within the NRMs.

2 The "gospel of prosperity," as discussed by Gifford (1988; 2004), refers to a Christian theological belief that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for His followers and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's material wealth. According to Gifford, this gospel emphasises that prosperity is a sign of God's favour and that through faith and specific religious actions — such as tithing, seed-faith offerings, and positive confession — believers can claim these blessings for themselves. Gifford critiques this approach for its materialistic focus, arguing that it often prioritises individual wealth and success over spiritual depth and ethical living.

Methodology

Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) phenomenological approach in Cox (1992) was used to understand the NRMs' contribution to community development. This approach suggests that one should suspend preconceived ideas and previous judgments, including one's feelings, ideas, and presuppositions, and attempt to see into the very essence of the phenomena themselves (Cox 1992). Within this method, the researcher entered into the believing communities and experienced what the communities experienced through performing *epoche*- holding back, bracketing or suspending preconceived ideas and allowing the phenomena to speak for themselves. Through *epoche*/ bracketing, the researcher then performed eidetic intuition³ into the essence or meaning of the phenomena (Cox 1992). Though this method has its weaknesses, especially in suspending preconceived ideas and bracketing as it is entirely impossible, it was the most critical and valuable in understanding the gospel of prosperity and the developmental contribution of NRMs to church adherents. A case study approach was used to investigate New Life Covenant Church (NLCC), Celebration Ministries and United Family International Church (UFIC), bringing an understanding of the complex issues around the theology of prosperity and its contribution to community development.

The study employed a qualitative approach, primarily relying on personal interviews conducted with individuals from NLCC, Celebration Ministries, and UFIC, including Pastors, church elders, and congregants. Non-participant observation involved attending church services and interacting with congregants to gain an in-depth understanding of the gospel of prosperity and believer experiences. Additional data sources included church websites and unpublished printed documents. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and verified, with data analysis conducted using Microsoft templates and coded by emerging themes. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent forms, emphasising voluntary participation, freedom to withdraw, and ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy of participants. The researcher met respondents at their churches to address ethical concerns effectively.

Origins of NRMs

The history of Pentecostalism can be demarcated into three waves of Christianity: missionary evangelism, classical Pentecostalism, and the third wave that birthed the Charismatic Christianity influenced by classical Pentecostalism (Meyer 2007; Anderson 2001; Gooren 2004; Hollenweger 2004). This third wave, which originated from the USA's healing revivals, emphasised the gospel of prosperity, championed by evangelists such as Kenyon, the Copelands, and Allen (Cornelio and Medina 2020). Its roots lie in the USA's New Religious Right Movement (NRRM) in the 1970s (Gifford 1988;

3 Eidetic intuition refers to grasping the essential qualities of an experience or phenomenon directly and immediately. In Husserl's phenomenology, this means setting aside all assumptions and biases to focus on the phenomenon itself, in its purest form, to understand its essence.

Togarasei 2005). By the time this movement reached Africa, it underwent a socio-political evolution.

A clear typology of NRMs in Zimbabwe has proved to be a challenge. Chitando (2014, 97) suggested three critical dimensions relevant to understanding Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe. Chitando (2014) argued that the first critical dimension involved the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), significantly contributing to Pentecostalism's emergence in Zimbabwe. Mapuranga (2013, 172) agrees with Togarasei (2010, 20) that this dimension fostered the development of many Pentecostal churches emerging from AFM. These churches share a common emphasis on the gospel of prosperity. The second critical dimension focuses on the unique African perspective on Pentecostalism, characterised by a belief in myriad spirits and powers. Unlike mainline churches occasionally confronting the government on socio-economic and political issues, Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, influenced by American Pentecostal trends, rarely challenges the state (Gifford 1988, 1, 1998, 315). This dimension involved televangelists such as Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, and Kenneth Copeland and NRMs such as Campus Crusade, Life Ministries, Rhema Bible Church and New Life Covenant Church (Sundkler and Steed 2000, 812; Gifford 1988, 50; Deuschle 2003). Some founders emerged from Zimbabwe and Nigeria, with many Zimbabweans trained under prominent West African preachers who were well-known for performing miracles (Marimbe 2024, 3). Such pastors include T.B Joshua of Synagogue Church of All Nations, Pastor Victor Kusi Boateng of Ghana, and Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy (Vengeyi 2013, 30).

The third critical dimension highlights the rise of youthful Pentecostal prophets after 2008, associated with the 'spirit type' prophets of Apostolic, Zionist, and Charismatic African Independent Churches (AICs) (Chitando 2014, 97; Gunda 2012, 335-336; Anderson 2001). This era saw the proliferation of the gospel of prosperity in Zimbabwe, witnessed by hyperinflation, economic and political crisis and increasing poverty, unemployment, high death rates, and hopelessness. Young, charismatic prophets become popular for their promises of miracles, wealth, health, and hope (Zimunya and Gwara 2013, 1870). Gukurume (2021, 30) refers to NRMs founded by youthful charismatic leaders from 2008 and onwards as the fourth wave of the Pentecostal category. He argues that the fourth wave is marked by a strong emphasis on the prophetic and miraculous accumulation of material wealth in the here and now rather than the life after death. While Gukurume (2021) considers these youthful charismatic leaders as the fourth-wave Pentecostal category, I argue that these youthful prophets still form part of the third wave, emphasising the gospel of prosperity. What makes them unique is their age and emphasis on miraculous wealth and healing, as well as the period (2008 onwards) in which they were bound to emerge within the Zimbabwean context. Vengeyi (2013, 31) clarified that these miracles and prosperity gospel are not entirely new to Zimbabwe. Such new churches include the United Family International Church of Emmanuel Makandiwa, International Denominational School of Deliverance of Oliver Chipunza, Heartfelt International Ministries of Tavonga Vutabwashe, Spirit

Embassy of Uebert Angel, Life House International Church of Talent Chiweshe, Kingdom Embassy of Passion Java, Revival Centre World Ministry of Adventure Mutepfa and Apostolic Flame Ministries of Zimbabwe of Oliver Chipunza (Vengeyi 2013, 28). The influence of African Traditional Religion (ATR) is evident in the spread of NRMs, where the blend of Christianity and traditional African beliefs has facilitated the growth and acceptance of these movements (Marimbe 2024, 4). This blend allowed NRMs to thrive, offering solutions to physical and spiritual needs through a familiar cultural lens, thus gaining significant traction among the Zimbabwean populace.

Characteristics of NRMs

The TWRRM, termed by Kalu (2008), encapsulates a range of fundamentalist independent groups who dissociate from traditional 'Pentecostal' branding. This form of Pentecostalism is dynamic and rapidly expanding, influenced by the American prosperity gospel and showcasing diversity in African Pentecostalism (Gifford 2016). The movement's distinctiveness in Africa is centred around youthful charismatic visionaries who represent their churches' core vision and embodiment. These leaders wield significant influence, often living opulently and propagating a theology emphasising material prosperity as a sign of divine favour (Gifford 2008, 2011; Swoboda 2015). Upon reaching Zimbabwe post-independence, TWRRM, with its prosperity gospel, they appealed predominantly to the middle class (Gifford 1990; Freeman 2012). Prominent Zimbabwean churches, emerging predominantly after 2008, include those led by prophets like Emmanuel Makandiwa, Oliver Chipunza, Tavonga Vutabwashe, and others (Vengeyi 2013; Chitando, Chikowero, and Madongonda 2015). Key tenets of these movements encompass a strict moral code, a disdain for African Traditional Religion(s), strong opinions on family and sexuality, prominence of healing and deliverance in worship, and a heavy emphasis on tele-evangelism (Gifford 1998; Freeman 2016; Dube 2019; Chitando and Biri 2016). Their ecclesial structure and worship patterns are contemporary, appealing to younger demographics, and encompassing various modern forms of music and dance (Togarasei 2010).

Theology of the Gospel of Prosperity

Central to these movements is the gospel of prosperity, proposing that material affluence is a Christian's divine right (Mumford 2012; Swoboda 2015; Togarasei 2011). This theology emphasises giving to the church as an act of faith, leading to God's multiplication of blessings (Girard 2013; Coleman 2011). The manifestation of these material blessings becomes a testimony of God's favour. Such teachings appeal to the affluent and the marginalised in societies like Zimbabwe, fostering a sense of empowerment, entrepreneurship, and hope (Togarasei 2011; Freeman 2016; Maxwell 1998). However, the prosperity gospel has faced significant criticisms. Its emphasis on individual prosperity often overlooks systemic oppressions and lacks a prophetic voice for change. Scholars like Gifford (1991) and Maxwell (1998) critique its lack of social responsibility and its diversion from pressing economic and political challenges. Some

theologians (Jones 1998; Muehlenburg 2009; McKnight 2010) decry it as heretical, arguing that it misconstrues the essence of the Christian journey.

NRMs in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe, a nation with a rich tapestry of religious affiliations, has witnessed a surge in New Religious Movements (NRMs) over recent decades. Beyond their spiritual endeavours, many of these NRMs have initiated development projects to address the nation's pressing socio-economic challenges. The following three NRMs were selected for this study.

The New Life Covenant Church (NLCC) and Empowerment

Bishop Tudo Bismak and Pastor Chichi started the New Life Covenant Church on 6 December 1998 (Adeboye in Ohlmann, Grab and Frost 2020, 120). Prior to that, the two were the senior pastors of New Life Temple in 1982. The New Life Covenant Church (NLCC)'s central teaching is on empowerment. It seeks to empower its followers. Within this empowerment and the gospel of prosperity teaching, the Church has provided opportunities for young people to change their contexts (Jabula NLCC, April 20, 2021).

Celebration Church and Building People's Dreams

The Rhema Bible Church came to Zimbabwe in April 1982. It claimed to run bible schools, audio-video tape ministries, a prison ministry, a youth ministry, a hospital ministry, and radio and compassion ministries (Gifford, 1998; Adeboye in Ohlmann, Grab and Frost 2020, 274). Tom Deuschle changed the Church's name to Hear the Word Church. He also launched Hear the Word Ministries to encompass all outreach efforts (Deuschle, 2003). At present, the Church is well known as Celebration Church. The claim is to celebrate a new life. Its thrust is mainly on building people and dreams (Deuschle, 2003). Emphasis is also on transforming people's lives through different sectors (Marimbe 2024). Transformation comes through obedience, as highlighted by one of the respondents who argued: 'If you are willing and obedient to the Lord, you shall be blessed materially here on earth.'

United Family International Church (UFIC) and the Financial Benefit

The United Family International Ministries (UFIC), founded by Emmanuel Makandiwa, comprises the United Family Interdenominational Ministries and the United Family International Church (Mahohoma 2016, 3). The Interdenominational Ministry is the mother ministry of the other ministries and arms. The United Family Interdenominational Ministries was launched in late August 2008 as a lunch-hour fellowship at the Anglican Cathedral along Nelson Mandela Road in Harare. The preaching of Prophet Makandiwa and the emphasis on the gospel of prosperity attracted many people in Harare (Chitando and Biri 2016, 74; Shumba 2015, 154).

Concept of Community Development

Maclure (2023) defines a community as a social group of organisms sharing an environment with collective interests. In a human community, it is pertinent to note that the participants' identity and degree of cohesiveness are influenced by the extent of their collective intent, beliefs, resources, preferences, needs, risks, and several other conditions. However, the development concept has been seen as something slippery and confusing. Many scholars understand development as economic development (Mudacamura et al., 2006; Rostow, 1990, 4). Other scholars argue for the need to abandon the concept of development because of its use in legitimating domination and exploitation (Munck and O'Hearn, 1999). Todaro and Smith (2011, 14), Mabogunje (2015, 43), Kambhampati (2004, 17) and Sachs (1992) see development as a multi-dimensional process. Dudley Seers in Todaro and Smith (2011, 21) argues that there is a need for redefinition of development, which refers to economic growth, modernisation, distributive justice, and socio-economic transformation. It is argued that three core values are sustenance⁴, self-esteem⁵ and freedom from servitude⁶. Sen (1999, 20), however, sees development as the expansion of instrumental freedom for every individual to lead the kind of life they have reason to value. The capabilities and functions are seen as more important than global or communal (Sen 1999, 20).

Based on the above information, community development means a group of people engaged in a process aimed at improving the community's social, economic, and environmental situation. Community development could also mean the planned evolution of all aspects of community well-being (economic, social, environmental and cultural). More so, it is a process whereby community members take collective action and generate solutions to community problems. Developing people's power, skill, knowledge and experience as individuals and in groups becomes critical. Members can then undertake initiatives to combat social, economic, political and environmental problems and fully participate in a genuinely democratic process (Maclure, 2023). In other words, community development is developing active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect. It involves influencing power structures to remove barriers that prevent people from participating in the issues that affect their lives. Hence, community development implies that a person has the ultimate authority to make decisions, which contributes to a social group of people sharing a

4 The ability to meet basic needs or the basic goods and services such as food, clothing and shelter that are necessary to sustain an average human being at the bare minimum level of living.

5 To be a person or the feeling of worthiness that a society enjoys when its social, political, and economic systems and institutions promote human values such as respect, dignity, integrity, and self-determination.

6 To be able to choose a situation in which a society has at its disposal a variety of alternatives from which to satisfy its wants and individuals enjoy real choices according to their preferences.

common interest in a shared environment. Given the rich literature on new religious movements and their impact on community development, the data provided about the New Life Covenant Church (NLCC), Celebration Church, and United Family International Church (UFIC) shows a clear pattern of religious organisations serving as agents of positive change in their communities. However, there are also inherent limitations to these observations.

Projects Implement by NRMs in Zimbabwe

The three selected NRMs in Zimbabwe actively engage in diverse initiatives spanning education, healthcare, entrepreneurship, and social welfare. This multifaceted approach reflects their commitment to societal development and aligns with the theology of prosperity, emphasising holistic well-being and community transformation.

Education Initiatives

One of the most noticeable forays of NRMs into development in Zimbabwe has been in the realm of education. Organisations such as the UFIC led by Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa have invested heavily in education. The UFIC, for instance, established the Life Haven Sanctuary, which, apart from being a retreat centre, provides vocational training for widows and the less privileged. UFIC has been paying school and examination fees for selected high school and tertiary students. Additionally, the NLCC's new generation youth ministry has been empowering young adults to overcome challenges encountered by school leavers, young professionals, and ministry aspirants.

Within Celebration Church, I noted that there is also Celebration School, a learning centre to develop students. This program focuses on a 'can do' mindset. Celebration Church has also embarked on a new state-of-the-art building project, an educational facility with the latest technology, science laboratories, dance and drama studios, music (choir and orchestra facilities), art and pottery rooms, a magnificent library and essential modern-day classrooms at its headquarters in Harare. Its college focuses on offering a tertiary education program in five schools of discipline, including business, education, art, music, and medicine. These institutions not only provide academic instruction but also integrate skills training and moral teachings based on the beliefs of the NRMs. Establishing learning centres, scholarship provisions, and other educational facilities by Celebration Church and other NRMs ensures that more individuals have access to quality education, a cornerstone of societal development. Such initiatives are consistent with the theology of prosperity as they underscore the belief in empowering individuals through education, promoting personal and societal development, and embodying principles of stewardship and care for others.

Health and Well-being

Healthcare is another pivotal area where NRMs have actively contributed. Many have established health centres and clinics for scientific assistance, providing medical

services either free of charge or at a substantially reduced cost. A notable example is the PHD Ministries led by Prophet Walter Magaya. The ministry has supported those afflicted with various ailments, especially chronic diseases, by offering spiritual and medical aid. Moreover, Celebration Church and UFIC have launched initiatives that promote mental health awareness, given the escalating mental health crises in Zimbabwe. Considering contribution to practical benefits, Celebration Church works on training leaders for church work, professional work and ministry in education, government, health, business, and fine arts (Magezi and Banda 2017, 6). There is an aspect of imparting values systems that enable followers to reverse past problems as they work with honesty, integrity and commitment to excellence. Celebration Church's work can be described as reformation as it wants to see society impacted and consequently reformed by kingdom principles (Deuschle, 2003). The Church is content with a ministry that builds people who can fulfil their God-given purpose and accomplish their God-given dreams. Worshipers are committed to healthy relationships, strong families, kingdom-minded businesses, and vital ministries, and this has led to the development of programs that touch every area of life.

In support of the above assertion, one respondent said: "God wants us to be prosperous, wealthy and rich, accumulating houses, cars, money and healthy relationships with other people." Such programs make Celebration Church accept people as they are and try to take them where they need to go in God. Such programs or projects include 'Celebration Health,' a non-profit organisation that carries out relief and developmental programs for underprivileged children and adults. The vision of Celebration Health is to transform and reform communities through sustainable healthcare solutions. Between 2008 and 2009, Celebration Health responded to the devastating cholera epidemic, saving up to 150,000 lives. In 2019, it provided healthcare during the cyclone Idai (Celebration Church, May 5, 2021). The churches, especially Celebration Church, show a tangible contribution to the community by providing medical aid, educational resources, and more. These initiatives provide immediate relief and also foster long-term benefits. Celebration Church's initiative, 'Celebration Health,' showcases how NRMs can address immediate health challenges. Responding to crises like cholera epidemics or providing surgeries, these movements provide tangible health solutions in places where state resources may be limited or stretched.

Since then, Celebration Health has toured different towns, conducting medical outreaches in Kadoma, Gweru, Masvingo, Mhondoro, Mutare, Bulawayo, Gwanda, Kwekwe, Harare and many more cities in Zimbabwe (Celebration Church, May 5, 2021). Notably, many lives were saved through this ministry, especially people who could not afford medical facilities because of severe financial challenges. Celebration Health facilitated several free operations, such as the hydrocephalus operations conducted in May 2009. In partnership with Doctors for Life and the University of Zimbabwe Department of Ophthalmology, Celebration Health performed 210 successful eye cataract operations. UFIC has contributed several practical benefits to church members through several initiatives. Pastor Ruth Makandiwa, the founder's wife,

Prophet Makandiwa, heads the charity ministry at UFIC. Her passion for improving the lives of the less privileged widows and orphans encouraged church members to donate in cash or kindness to support the less privileged members of society. In May 2010, UFIC donated beds, blankets and bedding materials, surgical gloves and mops, dishwashing liquid and electrical fittings to Chitungwiza Hospital. The ministry has also assisted selected families living in difficult circumstances with money for rentals and providing foodstuff, which resulted in distributing food hampers to widows. It was noted that UFIC partnered with selected children's homes and provided financial, food, clothing, and material support. The ministry donated clothing to welfare organisations and held Christmas parties for street kids in Harare. All these activities were done to extend the Church's contribution to practical benefits.

Microfinance and Entrepreneurship

Recognising the significant role of entrepreneurship in development, some NRMs have ventured into providing microloans and business training for budding entrepreneurs. For instance, the Spirit Embassy Church, led by Prophet Uebert Angel, initiated microfinance schemes that provide capital to small businesses and start-ups, focusing on youth and women. The NLCC has its foundational ethos in empowerment. With youth, women, and men's ministries, the church seems to directly target societal segments that require uplifting, thereby ensuring a holistic approach to development. The teachings of NRMs often help followers to find personal strength, resilience, and a renewed sense of purpose. By equipping individuals with a mindset of victory and capability, NRMs lay the foundation for community transformation while preaching savings, investment, and financial stewardship principles to instil fiscal responsibility. This not only aids individual growth but also leads to community economic stability as more individuals practice sound financial habits.

Within the NLCC, the covenant women's ministry focuses on women's empowerment and encourages them to reach their God's destinies. Such God destinies are seen as property owners, business owners, and career women through investment and savings programs designed to mentor women in business (Shumba 2015, 154). In a way, NLCC sees converts and its members as 'new creations' whom the church seeks to lead to new lifestyles (Chitando 2007, 116). One of the respondents argued: 'Businesses are initiated in our Church and schools are being built and developed'. The selected NRMs have sometimes taken the lead in gender empowerment. The covenant women's ministry of NLCC is a testament to this, focusing on empowering women to be property owners, business entrepreneurs, and career-oriented individuals, thereby challenging traditional gender roles. NRMs ensure the next generation is socially conscious and proactive by involving the youth in positive community activities, such as social outreach and community service. This engagement not only keeps young individuals occupied with constructive tasks but also instils in them a sense of purpose and community ownership.

King's fellowship is another men's ministry that nurtures godly men through character, competence and capacity building. It seeks to empower men with tools to help them

transform their homes, communities, cities and the nation (Magezi and Banda 2017, 6). By doing so, these movements seek to spur economic growth at the grassroots level while instilling values of self-reliance and diligence among their followers. The teaching on empowerment and proclamation, which NLCC emphasises, has been strengthened by its active involvement in numerous meaningful religious, humanitarian and practical projects. The term ‘empowerment’ has been the keyword in bringing light to a nation that has faced many challenges for over two decades. One of the respondents argued: “It is obedience to God that can help empower people in the community, and if we put Christ first and do his will, we will be able to have and share what we get from God with others in the community”. This suggests that individuals within the NLCC have been empowered to develop themselves and the community.

UFIC has been empowering widows and orphans by establishing income-generating projects. Such projects included dressmaking, market gardening, chicken rearing, vending, catering and baking activities, peanut butter, oil pressing and candle moulding activities. One of the respondents argued that: “People have been encouraged to start their businesses, thereby reducing too much dependency on other people”. UFIC has also held several business conferences with the most popular being the ‘Billionaires Mindset Summit’ helping followers to inculcate an entrepreneurial ethic, which is also a huge financial benefit to the church (Gukurume in Ohlmann, Grab and Fost 2021, 274). UFIC's emphasis on the gospel of prosperity and conducting business conferences, like the 'Billionaires Mindset Summit', demonstrates the role of NRMs in instilling an entrepreneurial spirit. These movements are nurturing the next generation of entrepreneurs by equipping followers with business knowledge and a growth mindset.

Considering the extraordinary work done by UFIC, NLCC, and Celebration Church, it can be argued that these denominations have contributed significantly to supporting their adherents in Zimbabwe. One of the respondents from Celebration Church argued: “We possess everything since Jesus paid it all; we claim what rightfully belongs to us because material possession is already there though with the wrong person. True believers must claim what rightfully belongs to them.” Even though these churches have no area of concentration that has made their contribution unpopular, it cannot be denied that through the teaching of the gospel of prosperity, believers could assist in providing solutions that, to some extent, alleviate poverty in Zimbabwe. One respondent argued, “If we seek God first, then all things shall be added onto us, we will be rich, and that is what God wants.” Another respondent expressed: “God wants us to be prosperous and wealthy by accumulating all the important materials and goods in this present life. If that happens, then we will be able to help others and change our country.” Within this context of the gospel of prosperity teaching, believers have been equipped to provide for their basic existential needs through entrepreneurship and the need to give to others generously. Based on the contributions from the three selected churches, a positive mindset for venturing into businesses and creating employment rather than being employed was encouraged, as witnessed in Frahm-Arp (2018, 5). One of the believers pointed out that “with emphasis on change in mindset, there have been reduced cases of

the dependency syndrome.” Many believers were encouraged to embark on new businesses and employment creation. Initiatives such as UFIC's income-generating projects for widows and orphans, which encompass dressmaking, market gardening, and more, provide direct skills that enable individuals to be self-reliant and contribute to the local economy.

Social Welfare and Vulnerable Populations

In response to Zimbabwe's multifaceted socio-economic challenges, including unemployment, poverty, and homelessness, NRMs have set up welfare programs. These range from orphanages, homes for the elderly, rehabilitation centres for substance abusers, and shelters for homeless individuals. One respondent pointed out: “Our church supports schools with fees for orphan and vulnerable children while we engage ourselves cleaning our streets and helping out at old people’s homes”. By providing these essential services, they aim to alleviate immediate suffering and offer pathways to more sustainable living conditions for the beneficiaries.

Within its enterprises, Celebration Church has focused on Champions for Life, one of the several relief and development programs for the displaced young people living with HIV/AIDS. This program has offered young people a brighter future to look forward to and hope to hold on and give unconditional love. One of the pastors argued: “We have a program that has helped more than 3000 children living and affected by HIV/AIDS”. Youth ministry was regarded as the heartbeat of the Church. In this place, there is just so much energy that cannot be missed, a place of vibrancy and a lot of young people who are so full of passion and zeal to serve God. Several outreach programs were noted that targeted the youth, especially at high schools such as Churchill Boys High and Harare Girls High and other community development initiatives where youths have volunteered to build the country. NRMs often emphasise charity and outreach. UFIC's charity wing, under Pastor Ruth Makandiwa, showcases direct interventions in uplifting the vulnerable, including orphans, widows, and the destitute. Such targeted interventions can mitigate social vulnerabilities and foster community cohesion.

Through their various projects, such as building orphanages and schools, administration at church television stations, and sermon and audio recording bookshops being implemented, these churches contributed to transforming the lives of adherents. These churches have created employment for their followers, and one of the respondents argued that the ‘building of orphanages has been embarked leading to employment creation.’ This assertion supports the scholarly views of Togarasei (2011), Maxwell (1998), Musoni (2013), Freeman (2012, 2016) and Freston (1995), who highlighted that the gospel of prosperity contributes to poverty alleviation, encouraging entrepreneurship and employment creation.

Challenges to NRMs' Contribution to Development

The selected NRMs in Zimbabwe face several challenges in their contribution to community development. These challenges range from issues of empowerment and over-spiritualization to economic disparities and dependency on spiritual leadership, each affecting the NRMs' ability to contribute effectively to community development.

Selective Empowerment and Over-Spiritualisation

Many NRMs offer empowerment initiatives based on their doctrinal beliefs, leading to selective empowerment (Malphurs 2005). The study noted that within the NLCC and UIFC, this, as noted by Allen (2023), restricted empowerment to specific genders, age groups, or social classes, reinforcing existing societal hierarchies and leaving those not adhering to their doctrines feeling excluded. This selectivity can deepen community divisions, where only certain groups benefit from the NRMs' activities. Furthermore, the overemphasis on religious pathways to empowerment created a dependency culture, where followers excessively relied on spiritual leadership for personal growth, negating the essence of empowerment. Harrison-Mills (2012) argued that over-spiritualisation can blur the boundaries between religious beliefs and practical life challenges. It was noted that within the NRMs, there can be an impeding pragmatic solution leading to economic and social repercussions. Nel (2020) noted that many followers of the NRMs seemed not concerned about seeking tangible solutions, viewing financial hardships merely as spiritual tests, which can alienate those seeking practical support and lead to disillusionment. While the selected NRMs' initiatives, such as health camps or educational scholarships, provide immediate relief, their long-term sustainability was questioned. This was exacerbated by the lack of structures for continued support, which made beneficiaries reliant on intermittent aid.

Prosperity Gospel Dilemma and Economic Disparities

The prosperity gospel, preached by NLCC, Celebration Church and UFIC, posits that financial success is a sign of divine favour. One of the respondents pointed out: "In our Church, my pastor emphasises that seek God first, the foundation of everything good and with God, you are 100% sure to be prosperous and develop." Such teaching can overemphasise materialism, potentially sidelining other crucial aspects of holistic development (Magezi and Madzanga 2016). It can also reduce spirituality to a transactional relationship with the divine, skewing self-perception among followers. Those facing financial hardships might question their faith or feel spiritually inadequate. Within the Zimbabwean context, it was noted that the prosperity gospel had been misused by some unscrupulous religious leaders who urged followers to make significant financial contributions with promises of divine returns, leading to financial strain for followers while benefiting the leaders. Bowler (2018) and Christerson and Flory (2017) argue that the emphasis on the importance of financial gifts to religious institutions led many followers to channel significant portions of their income towards the pastor, expecting divine financial returns. When these expected returns do not materialise, followers face significant economic setbacks. In addition, while the NRMs

champion entrepreneurial ventures, the benefits have often not evenly been distributed within the community, leading to increased economic disparities.

Short-term Focus and Community Engagement

Most NRMs' economic initiatives focus more on immediate monetary benefits than long-term economic stability (Bvute 2018; Nel 2020). While providing immediate employment, skills development programs such as dressmaking or market gardening might not be scalable or adaptable to changing Zimbabwean economic landscapes. Additionally, the lifestyle of some pastors, perceived as extravagant, raised questions about the authenticity of their commitment to community development. Pastors' contributions to vulnerable communities can often be seen more as humanitarian assistance or charity work rather than community development due to the lack of community involvement in generating solutions to their problems. What is evident within NRMs is that there is a tendency where the pastor and God are at the centre, as noted by one of the respondents who argued: "Being obedient to God can help to empower people in the community, and if we put Christ first and do his will, we will be able to have and share with others in the community." This implies that anything that believers do is decided by God or through God, not by the community. Hence, the community's involvement in any initiative from the initial stage is questioned.

Dependency on Spiritual Leadership

A critical aspect of some NRMs is the central role of spiritual leaders. Over-reliance on such leadership for guidance can hinder individual agency and foster dependency, contradicting the very ethos of empowerment. Daswani (2013) argued that the ultimate authority in decision-making often lies with the pastors, who are perceived as the voice of God. This limits community engagement in decision-making processes. Within this research, most respondents expressed ignorance of the projects funded by the Church except those directly benefiting or involving the pastor and his wife. In addition, most respondents pointed out that everything that happens at Church comes from the pastor because he is the voice of God, and "all we do is to listen to the voice of God and act upon it." Hence, there is no involvement of the people in the development initiative. This undermines the principles of community development, which involves active participation of the community in the decision-making process and in the development which the community wants. Most activities undertaken by NRMs are often decided without community consultation, making it difficult to classify these as community development. The lack of community consultation and active participation in decision-making processes further exacerbates this issue.

Conclusion

The article has shown that even though NRM churches contribute to the economic development of the communities, they still seem to be aligned with capitalist-oriented types of development, which create a gap between the elite (including pastors) and the

majority of the Zimbabwean poor. In as much as these churches encourage hard work and competition, they also seem to ignore the plight of those who cannot compete; ultimately, they become nothing more than just theoretical frameworks that support developmental theories like Modernisation or Neoliberalism. NRMs play a complex role in community development. Their passion, resources, and commitment have led to transformative changes in many contexts. However, recognising and understanding the inherent challenges in their methodologies is crucial. By critically addressing these challenges, both NRMs and communities can collaboratively pave the way for sustainable, inclusive, and holistic development. This article concludes that NRMs seem to exalt the creation of wealth and justification of spirituality at the expense of people-oriented frameworks that engender community development.

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