

## **A practical theology case study of transforming lives of the poor in the Amalinda Forest Community, East London**

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### **Abstract**

How can the problem of poverty be addressed by those concerned about the transformational development of the poor in South Africa? The church, as a community of faith and the bearer of the Christian witness cannot be left behind when responding to this question. This article reflects on a practical theological intervention where a church moved beyond its walls to help those in need. The active role played by the church in addressing this problem and the response of the community will be brought to light. However, this is a challenge that does not affect a local church only: research findings undergird the transformative engagement of the entire church community and calls for local social and political institutions to form a multipurpose partnership to deal with poverty in affected communities.<sup>1</sup>

### **Keywords**

*practical theology; poverty; transformational development; church; servant leadership; empowerment; sustainable development*

## **Introduction and background**

The quest for transformational development begins with the state of awareness to bring about change in the living conditions of the poor for

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1 It should be noted that this article explores the key findings of a PhD thesis; see Mazantsana (2023).

a better future (Anderson 1996; Theron and Maphunye 2005:18). The aforesaid in South Africa cannot be achieved without considering the poor and non-poor as made in the image of God and thus deserving to be recognised as having self-worth (Sugden 2003:74). In this regard, the launching point for increasing human freedom and agency is changed people with healed and restored bodies, mind, and spirit (Myers 2011:175–177). However, whilst we experience the freedom to cast our votes since the new dispensation, there is still an outcry that South Africa is in a state of collapse due to extreme poverty that drives people to criminal activities as a means of gaining livelihood (Ngara 2004:33 cf. Mazantsana 2003:76). A call exists for the Christian diaconal practice within the context of endemic poverty in South Africa, as the service delivery crisis leaves the poor even more oppressed than during the apartheid era (Swart 2013:1). The hope that was raised by the new government (De Gruchy & Ellis 2008) needs believers serving God through acts of justice for the economically vulnerable and oppressed (Stassen and Gushee 2003:43).

There is a need to promote Christian ethics by referring to the historical background of inequality in South Africa. This background as depicted by Wilson and Ramphela (1989) stresses a call to uproot poverty which is the greatest obstacle to economic growth. This involves the redistribution of wealth, and challenges those in power to consider sharing with those who are poor (1989:357). However, whilst there has been the call, the fractured and broken pieces of humanity in South Africa have become a normalized reality. This is witnessed by a continuous neglect of the oppressed and the marginalized Black people (Masungwini 2023; Boesak 2009:397). Another emphasis made by Ncube et al. (2012) is that the historical exclusion of the citizens from sharing the country's wealth caused some rifts that will take decades to mend (2012:8).

Considering the argument above, the historical insights of social work practice deserve mentioning. These include following the developmental model of social welfare in developing countries (Milley 1996) which sought to identify social interventions that have a positive impact on economic development such as showing how social expenditures can contribute to economic growth, including social and economic policies that serve as an integrated whole aiming at advanced economic development (1996:3). Responding to the above mentioned just and peaceful development

model of economic development, Boesak (2009) argues that if it could be implemented, poverty cannot just be alleviated but can be eradicated. In this regard, Christian ethics of what is right, good, true, wise and loving according to God's will for all people should be promoted (Kretzschmar 2014:1). It is for this reason that the involvement of the church of God cannot be left behind in transforming the country according to the will of God (Luke 11:2). This includes supporting the poor, the discriminated and the oppressed as they are members of the whole creation (Pillay 2017:10–11). In support, Boesak (2009) stresses that the present situation in South Africa has put a challenge to ordinary citizens including the Church to seek ways of developing poor communities to rescue the lives of the most vulnerable and poor in the country (2009:396–398). The argument is that the actions of Christians as regards the economy cannot be separated from their spirituality, together with their ethical norms and values. However, the opposite is just the disenfranchised ordinary people who are left to their own peril without support for their development (Boesak 2009:317). Thus, for us to explore what is going on in our societies, the role of the church needs to be observed and the people's response on the ground be explored. This should form the base of transformation because God calls human beings as His servants to be responsible, just and caring for the entire creation (Davis & Poe 2000:133).

The responsibility of caring for the poor was exercised in the Amalinda Forest community with overcrowded shack dwellers, suffering from unemployment and living in poverty which is threatening to the lives of children and even their parents. The congregants, mostly women of the Amalinda Methodist church of Southern Africa in East London responded to the challenge in that area by addressing the plight of the poor through a soup-kitchen project every Sunday morning before going to church. It became apparent that the soup-kitchen could be regarded as a metaphor which speaks to a broader and adverse condition of poverty in the country (Mills 2012; Hendriks 2010). The focus of this article prioritizes both the experiences of the poor and the members of the church involved in the soup-kitchen program. This intervention that has brought a foretaste of relief from poverty falls within the discipline of practical theology as it emphasizes human experiences as the premise – the starting point of research (Swinton and Mowat 2006:5; Hawkes 1989:29).

The abovementioned argument leads to a crucial discussion of the concept of poverty, its causes, and its impact on the real-life challenges of poor people. The challenges faced by the transformational developers also need to be observed.

## **Poverty as a burning problem in South Africa**

It should be noted that people suffer from poverty not because they do not have their inborn gifts and expertise from God, but the root cause is that they lack support, are neglected, and denied their rights to basic needs by those in power who only serve their own interests. There is a recurring argument that even after the first democratic election – inflicted by those in power who only serve their own interests – of 1994 poverty remains a burning problem in South Africa. (Seekings 2014:15; Kgatle 2017:1; cf. Armstrong et al. 2008 in Kretzschmar 2014:5). The results are households that struggle to meet the basic need for survival, leading to the poor getting poorer (Khotseng & Tucker 2013:5; Vorster 2007:64; Manala 2014:250; Bauer 2005:53). The majority in South Africa live in absolute poverty which means that they cannot afford to put bread on the table and thus suffer from starvation (Kgatle 2017:2; Gumede 2014:58). The results are households that struggle to meet the basic needs for survival.

Putting more emphasis in support of the aforesaid, Terreblanche (2004) accentuates that poverty reduction is impossible when we look at the rate of unemployment (2004:228). Another cause of the increase of poverty put forward by Gumede (2014:58) is that the growth of the economy which is constantly deteriorating has a negative impact and results in a high rate of poverty in South Africa. This means that practitioners of transformational development inherited a never-ending challenge of poverty alleviation in South Africa (see Mazantsana 2023:76). The inequality in this country continues and poses a challenge to structures responsible for the existing poverty to embark on transformational development of the poor (Manala 2014:259). It is therefore vital to give a brief discussion of transformational development in relation to poverty alleviation.

## **What transformational development entails**

The concept of transformational development can be posited as the Christian understanding of development. It entails bringing about change peacefully so that the relationships could remain balanced for further development. In addition, it highlights the importance of alleviating poverty of those who remain neglected and experience violation of their rights as people of God (Du Toit 2016:1; Myers 2011:137–157). Agreeing with the above Christian understanding of development, Offutt (2012) states that transformational development presents a Christ-centred perspective of development aiming at orienting evangelical development work around the world (2012:36).

In light of the above argument, the position of the transformational paradigm concerning poverty is a matter of great concern. Transformational development defines poverty as broken relationships with God, with oneself, with others and with creation (Offutt 2012:40). The argument is that it is only when these broken relationships are restored and healed in Shalom that we can witness transformation (Wolterstorff 1983:69). It is critical because broken relationships of the poor with oneself leads to isolation, remaining powerless, impoverished, and vulnerable. On the other hand, the non-poor are spiritually impoverished by playing God in the lives of the poor, resulting in the poor remaining socially and economically impoverished (Offutt 2012:41; Myers 2011:14).

It stands to reason that the most critical humanity's relationship to be restored is with the Triune God (Myers 2011:74; Benyan 2019:82–83). This is the core of the transformational development framework, otherwise we could not be talking about development. The different dimensions of the relationships should be restored by emphasizing the “twin goals” of transformational development, namely changed people, and changed relationships (Myers 2011:64). The focus is more on the poor to discover their identity as God's children and productive stewards in their vocation (Myers 2011:140). Currently, the non-poor are also expected to use their gifts to support all human beings and not as a source of control over them – all people have value in God's sight (Myers 2011:140; Anderson 2020, see Hankela 2022:5). In addition to the above scenario, Myers contends that Christians add another dimension to poverty as ‘deficit’ which is the non-Christian poor lack of knowledge about God and the good news of Jesus

Christ. Responding to this, the Christians add the knowledge of gospel as one other thing the poor do not have. Thus, the proclamation of the gospel is added to the development program (Myers 2011:114).

The above argument about the Christian understanding of transformational development challenges holistic practitioners to use a holistic approach and accompany the poor guided by God in the fullest sense (Myers 2011:232). This drives us to examine the role of the church in transformational development of the poor from a holistic point of view.

### **The role of the church in community development**

The mission of the church has developed to a more comprehensive scope than it traditionally used to be (Pieterse 2001). The church of today should actively engage with local community agents to advance economic and social developmental change for the common good towards sustainability of life and to serve all those in need (Mangayi 2016:24; Bonhoeffer 1971:382). The church in Africa, for instance, is also tasked to decolonise the minds of African Christians to reaffirm the equality of all South Africans irrespective of their human race (Vorster 2007:210). Van der Westhuizen and Swart (2015:751) also suggest that the future function of the church is to consider listening to the voices of vulnerable groups so that they can experience civil values and a sense of belonging. This is supported by a broader human rights culture that all people have value in God's sight (Anderson 2020:130; Freeman 2015:120–123; cf. Hankela 2022:5).

In support of the value bestowed by God upon His people, the African concept of “Ubuntu” needs to be embraced as the key foundation of basic values and ethics (Mazantsana 2023:99). The church is a sub-system of communities where people must live and practice ‘Ubuntu’ to nurture one another as children of God (Magezi 2017:9; Mangaliso 2001:24; Ncube 2010:77; Battle 2009:28; Klaasen 2019:2; Bowers du Toit 2017:5). Every single church is a public institution that should be perceived primarily as a community (Coleman 2003:36). In the same vein, the hermeneutic mission of being biblically vocal to the world should play a critical role in church ministry by advancing people's unity in helping one another and to assist those in need (Gibbs 2001:23; Van Wyk 2017:3–4; Niemandt 2019:16).

Addressing poverty from a Christian perspective in this country should be based on Jesus' teachings about compassionate and merciful justice to deliver the poor from poverty (Stassen & Gushee 2003:413). To support this, in Matthew (5:13) Christian leadership ought to function as the salt of the earth. It is therefore crucial that the church – particularly the Pentecostal church in Sub-Saharan Africa, with its belief in one God that exists as a Trinity – should focus on new opportunities for human flourishing in the transformational development of every community. In this regard, the mission of the church can be witnessed as having a powerful role to play for the development of talents and gifts for the sustainability of human life (Myers 2011:173–175).

It is also crucial to note that we do not view the church as a self-serving institution, but in essence, the church is called into being a public community by God (Acts 20:28). The involvement of the church in development is contained in the declaration of Jesus concerning his mission (Luke 4:18–19) bringing 'good news' to the poor (Belshaw 2001:223). The mission of the church in society is primarily a Trinitarian dynamic engagement involving the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This also involves transforming people through preaching and worship as God's missional imperative for the church (McGrath 2012:150). To this end, Christian love expressed as diaconal or serving action of the church implies searching, finding, and helping suffering neighbours (Pieterse 2001). This requires a sound visionary proactive leadership-action by those who are engaged in transformational development.

## **A call for selfless servant leadership**

A living example of servant leadership is of Jesus who as a committed servant came to serve and even sacrificed His life for sinners (John 10:11–18; Mark 10:45; Matthew 20:26–28; cf. Manala 2014:253). The following attributes of leadership are worth noting:

- Demonstrating agape love: servant leaders need to show love with a vision that will inspire the poor, the oppressed and the needy who are neglected to aspire for a better future (Meylahn & Musiyambiri 2017:2; Ngara 2004:43).

- Acting with humility: This is an action where popularity is not the leader's priority, but the key commitment is serving people (Morris et al. 2005:132; Ngara 2004:43).
- Being altruistic: Acting in the interests of others is the quality of leadership critically needed in South Africa, particularly in terms of the ongoing dominating problem of service delivery experienced both in national and provincial government (Manala 2014:255, see Mazantsana 2023:100–101).

Coupled with the above-mentioned attributes is leadership that moulds behaviour to interact with others in taking sound ethical decisions (Ngara 2004:43).

The brutal killings of mine workers by the police in Marikana on 16 August 2012 demonstrated a lack of altruistic leadership that left the families exposed to severe poverty (Boswell 2013:26; cf Rafapa 2014:5). This is against the ethical and morally acceptable standards of prioritizing people's lives and their basic needs (Mokgoba 2013:8). The Marikana killings exhibit no difference from the Sharpeville tragedy of March 1976 (Dolamo 2019:4; De Grunchy 1979:234).

Leadership failures accentuate the need to redress evil that can only lead to exacerbating the poverty trap. The church is called to advance the well-being of the poor towards a sustainable existence that mirrors the values of the Kingdom of God – shalom, justice and well-being (see Ceesi & Bowers du Toit 2019:2). This is a call for every citizen including those in leadership, particularly political parties and leaders, to openly challenge hindrances of proactive and healthy human and community development (Emmett 2010:516). Poor political leadership, and dysfunctional service delivery in South Africa have almost been normalized as seen in the staggering rate of corruption, gender discrimination, raising unemployment, nepotism, abuse, and the unguarded violation of human rights (Manala 2014:251). The church should actively combat these evils in society as during pre-1994. The progressive role of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to fight against the brutal apartheid regime's racial discrimination, oppression, and marginalization of Black people, should be regained (Mandela 1994:15). We are in dire need of sound ethical and moral leadership and governmental



systems of accountability, empowerment, and sustainability – ensuring the wellbeing of every person in society.

## **The Amalinda Forest case study**

In this article a comprehensive understanding of poverty, poor and non-poor, their relationships with God and the environment are developed. A statement presented by Magezi (2017:4) is that a case study could provide detailed appeal of understanding the various dynamics of church community interactions that may not be captured had other methodologies been used. The objective is to explore the experience of the real-life settings by the group participants in a specific context (Crewe et al. 2011:2; see Beukes 2019:6).

The research that informed this article was conducted in the Amalinda Forest community in an area with shacks that are densely built and overcrowded. Our case study illuminates the development of a better understanding of how the Amalinda Methodist Church has gained a consciousness of poverty alleviation and how the residents of the Amalinda Forest community perceived the actions of the church to fight poverty in their community. The initial role of the church to initiate a soup kitchen was not just an objective in itself, but the aim and purpose of the church's action and intention needed to be investigated. This would set a practical example from which more congregations as well as the practitioners of transformational development together with poor communities can learn how to play a proactive and liberating role to redress poor living conditions (Baxter & Jack 2008:544; see Westhuizen et al. 2019:4).

The involvement of the Methodists in supporting the poor is inherited from their historical background where John Wesley urged supporting the poor through charitable deeds (Marquardt 1992:28). Elaborating on the mission work of the Methodists, Ketshabile (2006) states that the Women's Manyano and the Young Men's Guild are called to execute God's liberation mission work. It is believed that through these organizations' spirituality, fellowship and social holiness are nurtured (2006:104). A motivational comment by Snyder (2011a) claims that "to be Wesleyan means to see the

world through the eyes of the poor and to help incarnate the Good News among and with the poor” (2011a:25).

## Methodology utilized

The qualitative research approach was followed to develop an understanding of how members of the church experienced the engagement in the transformational development of the poor and what the poor in the community experienced before and after the implementation of the project (Creswell 2007:37–39). The qualitative data was obtained from a purposively selected sample that represented the wider community of the church and the local community (Heitink 1993:14–15). An empirical approach was used to obtain reliable data from people who shared the same experience. Pieterse (1994:82) maintains that in practical theological studies, the empirical approach is used for reliable data and is a useful science for problem-solving in every church practice in the modern era.

## Sampling

Sampling involves identifying, choosing, and gaining access to relevant data sources from a relevant wider population (Mason 2002:120).

In this case study, the sample was selected from the members of the Methodist church who participated in the project including Women’s Manyano, Young Men’s Guild, and Church leaders (n=16). The other sample was withdrawn from members of the Amalinda Forest community (n = 16) where the soup-kitchen was implemented. This made a total of thirty-two (n = 32) participants.

The Research Methodology used to collect data was a multimethod one, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and direct observation (Grinnell 1988:274), and the technique was asking clear and brief open-ended questions (de Vos et al. 2015:343–344). The researcher engaged in an ‘early to rise’ campaign every Sunday morning to observe how the soup was prepared in the church kitchen, loaded by the YMG members in their *bakkies*<sup>2</sup> and delivered to the community. The process of serving the soup

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2 South African word for pick-up truck or utility vehicle.

and the whole procedure was witnessed and field notes were taken (Saldana 2009:18).

Ethics for conducting research was followed and permission to conduct research was obtained from the Superintendent of the Methodist Church Circuit 313 in Buffalo City, the resident Minister of the Amalinda Methodist Church, and the society stewards. After receiving permission, consent forms were signed voluntarily by the participants at Amalinda Methodist Church (de Vos et al. 2015:115–117).

### **The findings**

Findings of the research will be presented by starting with the responses from the members of the church to certain questions that were common for each group sharing the same experience. This will be followed by the findings as retained from the community focus group responses to some of the questions. The first question was to depict a clear picture in order to showcase how the program was started by the church. The soup-kitchen was initiated by three classes but was later adopted by the whole congregation. The first Sunday experience in that community was a fascinating one, because the congregants started with evangelism to introduce the soup-kitchen. A response by one church respondent was: “I still remember that Sunday morning when we were led by our Evangelist to the location to introduce the soup-kitchen, it was singing, joy and praising the Lord”. It is stated that people were alerted to come to the open site where soup was to be served. Before serving the soup the church leader of the Children’s Ministry conducted a small service and the children were asked to sing the ‘Thank You’ prayer. Although the soup was intended for the children, even the adults came in and they were also served. This was a sign of acting with mercy (Matthew 5:7).

According to Abraham (1989:95) evangelism involves working with peace, proclamation and showing acts of mercy, justice and caring for the poor (Myers 2011:320). Supporting evangelism, Jesus stressed that man shall not live by bread alone but also by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). Serving the soup on Sunday morning before going to church demonstrated walking in Jesus steps of His Healing on Sabbath (Luke 6:8). This assisted with the spiritual transformation for both the

church respondents to practice what they preach and the members of the community to be engaged in worshipping God.

Hankela et al. (2020:19) emphasize not just bringing people to church but bringing people to Christ by going out to people, (evangelism) winning more souls and sometimes doing soup-kitchen, giving people food, and giving them clothes. This is exactly what the Amalinda Methodists started doing in transforming the lives of the poor in the said community and they acted according to the will of God by not neglecting the poor. Belshaw et al. (2001) suggest that projects that relieve suffering of the poor should not be neglected.

The findings concerning the poverty in the Amalinda community indicate that the adults were also starving. This was surely the result of unemployment, one of the causes of poverty in South Africa – as mentioned in our introduction.

### **Other means of transforming lives**

The provision of the soup and promotion of spirituality cannot be regarded as the only solution to transforming the lives of the poor by the church and some other means needed to be identified. Responses to a question — “what other means were used to transform lives of the poor?” The respondents mentioned that they collected clothing to be distributed amongst the poor. They also asked for support from the Roman Catholic Church which helped by supplying more clothing. Another assistance was from the members of the church who are teachers. They brought application forms for grade 12 learners and monitored them in completing the forms on their own for admission at tertiary level. The health workers helped the community with referral letters to clinics as a way of transforming the health conditions of people (see Mazantsana 2023:162). Those who are social workers helped with referrals to visit the home affairs department for ID documents that are needed for grants. In this regard, members of the AMC could be regarded as deacons-bridge-builders between a local community and the church (Von Michael & Klaus 2011). This single study demonstrates how a church can be proactive in alleviating poverty in a single community by

providing educational, health and social services support in the absence of local governmental institutions (Mazantsana 2023: 134–136).

The challenges put forward by the congregants were the open space where soup was served which was not conducive to such a function. The support of the local government is needed for fixing the access road, which is in great bad condition, the shacks that are very small but overcrowded, and the dangerous illegal electrical connections were a matter of great concern. Agreeing with the above-mentioned need for the local government intervention, Soares, and Quintella (2008) argue that all those deprived of the basic needs are classified as poor, because they are not capable of satisfying the needs in the way they desire (2008:112).

The servant and transformative leadership were exhibited through the leadership practices of the volunteers who supported with finance for the sustainability of the project, these included some members of the Women's Manyano and the YMG members as the amount allocated to the program from church collection would not be enough sometimes (Mazantsana 2023:136; 140).

The use of focus groups informs that people have a range of feelings about something. In this case, the members of the community focus group's feelings were explored. According to Fontana and Frey (1994:652) focus groups are useful for collecting data that is cumulative and elaborative. The findings from the interviews with the focus group shared a range of feelings. When the soup-kitchen project started they felt they were being cared for by the church people, because the children suffer during the weekends as the school nutrition is not there. The initial intervention of the church prompted a need by the affected community for an increase in the provision of food by the church. One respondent pleaded, "We ask that one day be added to get soup at least two times a week." They mentioned that the soup was helping the poor to gain power and could balance and go to seek jobs even on Sundays because of poverty. The community focus group also appreciated being given clothes and their children could manage to have changing clothes (Mazantsana 2023:147; 149).

Responding to a question, "What challenges would you like to be addressed in your community?", the following challenges were mentioned: a complete lack of access to the Amalinda community, unhealthy environment

conditions, leaking water pipes and taps, dumping sites in close proximity of the community, even one next to the open space where soup was served – lack of housing, overcrowded shack dwellings, illegal dangerous electrical connections and scarce visits by the ward councillor. One community member responded, “We have been staying here for more than twenty (20) years, but no houses are built for us” (see Mazantsana 2023:145–150). These challenges suggest that poverty alleviation in South Africa requires churches and the practitioners of development to aggressively advance transforming the lives of the marginalized, poor, sick, vulnerable, and oppressed.

The researcher’s direct observation findings are not far from what was said by the residents and the church members concerning the lack of service delivery for the social living environment. It was not easy to get on a driveway that is in a very bad condition. The condition of the open space, from the very first day of experience, could be identified as not conducive for serving food due to its proximity to the dumping site.

However, it was very interesting to see how the church members started their serving session with the children singing and praying. The role played by a few adults to help the church people to serve the children and everybody was a sign of dedication by both parties. A challenging observation one Sunday morning was when clothes and shoes were distributed. People, including adults were pushing one another to get more than one item. The church members struggled to control all that confusion – an act of desperation and a sign of being disadvantaged and in need. Despite the commotion, the church members continued with their mission and could give more than one item after each round of giving – a sign of mercy, treating everyone equally with love.

## **Promoting empowerment and sustainability**

Tangible transformation in the development of local communities, particularly the lives of the poor, should focus on basic human needs in bringing forth change that would benefit the whole community, not only the selfish interests of a few (Naidoo 2012; see Manala 2014:251; van der Westhuizen 2021:4). To promote this, empowerment is the key driver

for sustainable community development. It is understood as an action that is done to people for them to develop capacity to access resources or gain capabilities (Carr 2011:2). Once empowerment has been gained and developed, the oppressed must build an understanding of their situation and be able to identify their priorities and participate (Herman 2014:1929). Drawing from the research data in this case study, it became apparent that the poor were starting to regain their identity and vocation when they decided to clear the dumpsite for a structure where soup could be prepared and served. According to Waweru (2015 see van der Westhuizen 2021:3) participation in community development should involve all role players with a change from top-down to bottom-up practices and responsible involvement. In the case of the Amalinda Forest community, the church members were informed by the community what best could be done to support for the sustainability of the project, for instance opening a garden at the end of the shacks where vegetables for the soup could be planted (Mazantsana 2023:171).

In the case of empowering the poor, democracy and sharing of power need to be considered to promote the experience of doing things that people would claim as their effort. This would lead to sustaining the project for themselves (see van der Westhuizen 2021:3–4). It is also imperative that all forms of sustainable development be prioritized including physical sustainability with basic human needs such as food, water, health, and livelihood to sustain people's lives. Concerning mental sustainability, we need to be aware that when people suffer from hunger and poverty, their well-being is also affected (see Mazantsana 2023:105). The agenda of the National Framework for Sustainable development (NFSD) calls for the implementation of strategic interventions in South Africa's development process in a sustainable manner for the present and future generations (DEA 2019:22). Social sustainability should involve providing essential support to communities where the state failed to provide basic human services (De Waal 1997:219). Spiritual sustainability calls the church to serve and love communities with empathy as well as prophetic voice through healing for wholeness to be reconciled with God, us and the poor (cf. Offutt 2021:46). What transpired in the Amalinda Forest community when everything was started, prayer empowered the community to a change of their spirituality to know that God sides with the poor and powerless in a very special way

(Plaatjies-van Huffel & Modise 2017). Boesak (1984) also stresses that the God of the Bible is the God of the poor and the oppressed, and that He is on their side. Disempowered and politically oppressed communities need to be liberated and a renewed conscientization needs to be promoted that not all political parties and leaders are to be trusted and supported, but it is only God who brings forth true righteousness and justice and wholly concerned about the well-being of the poor (Adamo 2011:4; Myers 2011:202).

## **Conclusion**

The intervention of the AMC in our case study can be analysed by referring to Pieterse's contribution who – after his deep thoughts of going through struggles concerning transformation – gives recommendations by posing the following questions (2001:115–118): what role can the church... play to give the poor inspiration and vision so as to empower them to ameliorate their circumstances and thus bring about liberation from their situation of poverty? He then developed the following theory for the praxis of the church in a context of poverty, (1) opting for a preferential option for the poor, (2) listening and understanding the poor by respecting their human dignity and engaging in community development as an experience of freedom, 'a spiritual enterprise ... benefitting the whole of people's lives', by triggering a transformation process (Pieterse 2001:115–117).

Following Pieterse's insights, it is fair to argue that the AMC in our case study implemented a developmental praxis in a context of poverty based on sound theological and developmental principles. These were witnessed when the AMC exercised the task of practical theology to develop authentic practices of support and help regarding the personal and the community needs of people (Lartey 2006:3; 11). This service relates to an unselfish service ethic (Dames 2017:7). The following practical involvement of the AMC in bringing about changes in Amalinda Forest community deserve mentioning: supporting the poor by leaving the walls of the church and starting their mission with evangelism, which boosted the community's spirituality. The guidance of the Children's Ministry that involved the children's participation in prayer also provided a sound foundation of Christianity amongst some of the members of the community who, one



Palm Sunday followed the members of the church to Amalinda Methodist Church (see Mazantsana 2023:139).

The community started to take responsibility for their desperate living conditions with positive thinking skills and co-operation including helping children to be the first to be served with soup, improving their appearance by stopping coming to the site in morning gowns, and taking responsibility to participate in washing the utensils after soup was served.

It was vivid that the residents were keen for partnership when they mentioned forming a team with leaders to work together with the church after starting a vegetable garden with the church providing seeds to that effect. Some members began to identify some available resources in their environment such as the bush below the settlement where young men with building skills cut trees to make poles for building. Some of them were even gifted at making walking sticks (see Mazantsana 146–150). This is a matter of great concern where the church could plan for collaboration with the government departments, for example in this case, the Department of Public Works to train the unemployed youth in their skills to bring about change in their lives.

The challenges mentioned by the respondents from both the church and the community as well as observed by the researcher in this case study indicate that poverty alleviation in South Africa requires churches to intervene in transforming the lives of the marginalized, poor, sick, vulnerable, and oppressed (van der Westhuizen et al. 2021:3). The intervention of the church in this article brought signs of hope and human dignity to a community plagued with lack of service delivery and even scarce visits by the local government councillor. This is when a progressive and proactive ministry of the church should always be based on promotion of tangible authentic unity, peace, freedom, righteousness, and the liberation of all people from oppressive hegemonic political, social, and economic systems and leadership (Plaatjies-van Huffel & Modise 2017). Future leaders need not wait to plan proactively for sustainable community development projects. Literature indicates that servant leadership is calling for putting the needs of others first and to assist people develop in their respective duties (van Wyk 2017:7).

Leaders are called upon to promote a lasting legacy of existence, moral and spiritual change in every community. There is a demand for an inherent ethical imperative to transform Africa in terms of its politics, economy, and society (Mwamazambi 2013:155). In a nutshell, the quality of life, including the complex and pervasive social and political challenges, calls for servant leadership to reconstruct pervasive poor living conditions by providing essential services to African communities including South Africa (Adhiambo 2012:158).

The findings also indicate that practical theology deals with God's activity through the ministry of human beings (Heitink 1993:6–7). In this case, God's activity to cater for the poor has been dealt with through the ministry of the Amalinda Methodists who, as suggested by the findings, carried on supporting the poor until they were keen to take responsibility for their desperate living conditions and engendering positive thinking about their own transformational development. This is a God-given obligation of all social institutions to serve humanity with humility for every society to flourish (Dames 2017:8; Dreyer 2004:4). Transformation is not an overnight journey. The involvement of the church for an immediate relief is commendable (Korsten 1990:115). However, empowerment through some programmes for a complete community independence needs to be considered by future transformational development researchers.

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