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Community development: The mandate of the church

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This article examines the church's mandate for community development by tracing its foundations in the Old Testament, the New Testament and historic Christian practice. It first considers the Old Testament as Christian Scripture and analyses God's developmental initiatives, environmental stewardship, anti-slavery measures, poverty alleviation and care for the marginalised, as formative models of community-building. It then explores Jesus' social engagement in the New Testament, highlighting how his healing ministry, socio-humanitarian actions, feeding miracles and commitment to justice advanced social and economic inclusion. The study also surveys key expressions of community development within Christian tradition. Together, these explorations demonstrate that community development is not an optional activity but an integral dimension of the church's vocation.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study integrates biblical theology, New Testament studies and practical theology with development studies, social justice theory and medical anthropology. By combining exegetical analysis with social-scientific perspectives, it offers a holistic and contextually grounded framework for understanding the church's role in community development and encourages constructive engagement between theology and contemporary development practice.

Keywords: community development; *imago Dei*; Jesus' ministry; social justice; healing; humanitarian action; Old Testament; New Testament.

Introduction

The need to establish a biblical and historical mandate for community development arises from the conviction that the church exists to do the will of God (Mt 7:21). Scripture presents this obedience as the defining measure of faithful ministry: Jesus completed the work entrusted to him (Jn 17:4), and Paul affirmed the same at the end of his life (2 Tm 4:7–8). Because the Bible reveals God's will, and the church's historical practice reinforces this witness, it offers essential guidance for discerning whether community development forms part of the church's vocation.

Clarifying this mandate also strengthens the church's confidence and commitment to such work. Moreover, since eternal reward is tied to fulfilling God's will (Mt 25:31–46), determining the place of community development within the church's earthly assignment becomes a matter of faithful responsibility. For these reasons, it is necessary to articulate a clear mandate for community development in the life of the church.

The biblical mandate for community development: An Old Testament foundation

Community, in its broadest sense, denotes a group bound by shared geography, identity, experience or vocation (Crow 2011), while a mandate refers to an official order or commission to perform a particular task (ed. Lea 2010:903), and development concerns the improvement of human conditions (Sen 1999; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2018).

An elucidation of the concept of community development suggests that it is a planned process of improving all aspects of community well-being (Frank & Smith 1999). This assertion indicates a deliberate, long-term process aimed at enhancing the overall quality of life for everyone. In terms of its scope, community development encompasses the economic, social (including health and education), environmental and cultural dimensions of community life (Frank & Smith 1999). Similarly, Torneire (2021:5) identifies economics, culture, social conditions, the environment and politics as some of the key areas that community development must address. These assertions raise the following question: Can the footprints of God, Jesus, and the early church be found in these areas of community development – namely economics, social conditions, culture, the environment and politics – as the Old Testament, the New Testament, and historic Christian practice are examined?

This section examines the Old Testament basis for the church's mandate in community development, before turning to the New Testament.

The relevance of the Old Testament

A preliminary question concerns the Old Testament's authority for Christians. Marcion famously argued for a radical discontinuity between the Jewish Scriptures and the Christian New Testament, rejecting the Old Testament's ethical authority altogether (Wright 2009:102). Chrysostom similarly contended that 'a whole new dynamic had entered the world with the arrival of the gospel of Christ', and therefore did not accept that Old Testament law retains ongoing moral authority for Christians; in his view, practices permitted under the Old Testament could legitimately be rejected in light of the newness of life in Christ (Longenecker 1987:27).

Calvin (1536), however, countered that both Testaments constitute a unified Christian Scripture, to be interpreted and obeyed in the light of Christ. Lunde (2008:8) similarly observes that New Testament authors frequently cite Old Testament passages to make theological points, confirm prophetic fulfilments or provide the foundation for ethical exhortations. This continuity is textually demonstrable across several dimensions. Firstly, the criterion for justification in Genesis 15:6 reappears unchanged in Romans 4, and Hebrews 11 calls Christians to emulate the faith of Old Testament figures. Secondly, a diachronic study of salvation shows that it is not unique to the New Testament, beginning in the Old Testament (Ex 14:13–14; Ps 3:8; Is 12:2; 49:6) and culminating in Christ (Ac 4:12). Thirdly, the New Testament draws extensively on Old Testament language and imagery: Romans 10:6–9 cites Deuteronomy 30:12–13 and 32:32 to explain righteousness by faith, and 1 Corinthians 5:7 employs Passover imagery to describe Christ. Most strikingly, Wiersbe (1992:789) notes that out of the 404 verses in the Book of Revelation, 278 contain references to the Old Testament, with an estimated 500 or more allusions drawn from books such as Psalms, Daniel, Zechariah, Isaiah and Ezekiel. These continuities affirm that the Old Testament remains authoritative Christian Scripture from which the church may draw ethical and developmental guidance, including its mandate for community development.

God as developer: The creation mandate (Gn 1–2)

The church's developmental mandate is most fundamentally grounded in the creation narrative. Genesis 1:1–31 presents God as the original developer, forming, ordering and perfecting creation out of formlessness. Ross (2000) comments that the Hebrew *bara*, translated as 'created', highlights that what was formed was new and perfect, noting further that:

> God created light, which was natural and physical; He separated the atmospheric waters from the terrestrial waters; formed dry land with its vegetation; and made two great lights, the greater to govern the day and the lesser to govern the night. (p. 27)

God also made the stars and set them in the vault of the sky to give light to the earth, and these heavenly bodies were to serve as signs for seasons, days and nights (Gn 1:16–17; Ross 2000:29). After these acts, Scripture records that 'God saw all that He had made, and it was very good' (Gn 1:31). Commenting on the word 'good', Dryness (1983:22) explains that in Hebrew thought, goodness carries a broader meaning extending beyond the ethical to include the aesthetic, implying that creation was not only morally upright but functionally and visually suited for its intended purpose.

Humanity, created in the *imago Dei* (Gn 1:26–27), inherits both the capacity and the responsibility for ongoing development. The Hebrew terms *tselem* [image] and *demut* [likeness] denote similarity to God without identity (Grudem 2000:540), and Grudem (2007) explains that the image of God means that humanity is like God and represents God. This likeness endows human beings with personality, intellect, moral agency and creative capability, enabling them to relate to one another and to continue the work of creation through self-development (Fosu 2022:154). Since the close of the 6 days of creation, all subsequent development has been a human enterprise: Humans have innovated means of transportation, constructed remarkable architectural structures and advanced civilisation across every domain. The church thus derives its developmental mandate from the theological conviction that humans, as image-bearers of the ultimate Developer, are commissioned to continue God's creative and formative work in the world.

Genesis 2:8–15 extends this mandate to environmental stewardship. These verses describe the garden ecosystem into which God placed humanity, filled with trees, animals, rivers and precious minerals, and explicitly charge humans to tend and preserve it (Gn 2:15). As Balasubramanian (2019:2) defines it, the ecosystem is 'the geographical area where plants, animals and other organisms, as well as weather and landscapes, work together to form a bubble of life'. This God-given environment was intended not only to promote resilience and stability, but also to provide essential resources for human well-being, including food, medicine and cultural diversity (Amaral-Zettler, Zettler & Mincer 2020). However, the environment originally entrusted to humanity has come under severe threat. Since the early 1970s, studies have accumulated evidence of both regional and global environmental disasters (Meadows et al. 1972), including soil erosion, industrial pollution, animal cruelty and urban waste mismanagement (Conradie 2006:19). These hazards have since intensified and now include global warming, ozone layer depletion, acid rain, toxic and nuclear waste, the destruction of rainforests, rapid biodiversity loss, soil salinisation and the collapse of fishing industries through persistent overfishing (Conradie 2006:19). Given that human health and well-being are intrinsically linked to the health of the ecosystem, the church can respond to this crisis by promoting environmental conservation through awareness-raising, emphasising stewardship ethics and integrating these principles into its teaching and practice (Areo 2020).

God as social developer: Exodus and the Mosaic Law

The Old Testament equally mandates social development. In Exodus 1–13, God liberates Israel from a dehumanising and oppressive social condition, demonstrating his active opposition to injustice and his commitment to human dignity. The Egyptians had enslaved the Israelites, subjecting them to harsh forced labour: 'their lives made bitter through arduous work with bricks, mortar, and strenuous labor in the fields' and oppressing them ruthlessly (Ex 1:11, 13–14). God's deliverance of Israel from this hostile environment and his provision of a land of improved living conditions (Dt 6:3) reveal a God who is concerned not merely with spiritual welfare but with the material and social conditions of human life.

In the promised land, however, social challenges persisted. Although the land is described in idyllic terms as 'flowing with milk and honey' (Ex 3:8; Dt 6:3; 11:9) and abounding in natural resources (Dt 8:7–10), not all Israelites had equal access to its benefits. Hiers (2002:49) identifies the particularly vulnerable groups as resident aliens, widows, orphans, slaves, hired servants and at certain points even the Levites, who required public support. In response, God instituted comprehensive social welfare legislation through the Mosaic Law. The Deuteronomic Code insists that those responsible for justice ensure that vulnerable groups receive equal rights and protection: 'Curse be he who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow' (Dt 27:19). The law prohibits lending to the poor with interest (Ex 22:25), demands compassionate treatment of resident aliens (Dt 10:19) and issues a pointed warning against the oppression of widows and orphans:

> [*Y*]ou shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry to me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword. (Ex 22:22–24)

The Mosaic Law also strongly opposes the exploitation of hired workers (Dt 24:14–15) and mandates protection for the disabled (Dt 27:18). Gleaning rights are granted to foreigners, the fatherless, and widows to ensure access to food (Dt 24:19–22), and the triennial tithe is allocated to Levites, sojourners, orphans, and widows for their sustenance (Dt 14:28–29). Hiers (2002:71) explains that this triennial tithe 'effectively established a form of local food bank for the needy', with arrangements likely made to preserve and distribute produce over time, ensuring the poor were not solely dependent on gleanings or festival offerings.

The sabbatical legislation further underscores this social vision. Burnside (2010) identifies three key institutions:

> [*T*]he weekly Sabbath (one day off every seven days), the sabbatical year (one year off every seven years), and the Jubilee year (an additional year off after seven cycles of seven years). (p. 221)

Forming a comprehensive spectrum of Sabbaths designed to promote rest, restoration and justice. The weekly Sabbath protected vulnerable workers by establishing clear limits on labour and preventing exploitation (Olanisebe 2018). As Jones (ed. 2004) aptly observes, 'Sabbath laws are not so much demands as they are a liberation from demands, offering rest, freedom, and renewal'. The list of beneficiaries in Exodus 23:12 includes even 'the son of your bondmaid', underscoring the inclusive and protective reach of the law. Former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan acknowledged this biblical principle in a 1986 House of Lords debate, where he stated (Hansard 1986):

> Let us remember that great commandment that was handed down to God's chosen people was perhaps the greatest social reform in the history of civilization, the concept that every man or woman, however humble, should have at least some periods of rest. (p. 160)

The sabbatical year mandated debt cancellation, generosity towards the poor and the release of slaves, with the instruction that freed persons 'should not be sent away empty-handed' (Dt 15:1–18). The Jubilee year extended these economic reforms further, restoring patrimonial land to original family owners (Safren 1999) and thereby preventing the entrenchment of generational poverty. Land transactions were regulated according to the number of years remaining until the next Jubilee (Lv 25:14–17), and land sold by an Israelite could be redeemed at any time by the seller or a close relative (Lv 25:25–27). Scholars broadly agree that these provisions targeted economic disadvantage; Bak (1959:194) contends that 'all the provisions of release during the Jubilee were designed to improve the condition of the poor and the dispossessed'.

In evaluating these Old Testament provisions, it is evident that they contain more comprehensive frameworks for social development and welfare than is often recognised. The purpose of highlighting them here is not to advocate the literal reinstatement of sabbatical legislation or gleaning laws, but to demonstrate that these laws reveal a God deeply invested in the social and material well-being of the marginalised. From these laws, the church discerns that pursuing the welfare of the socially disadvantaged is not merely a social concern but a moral and theological imperative. This biblical vision aligns with the broader goals of development theory, namely the realisation of improved living conditions for all people (Willis 2011). The church may therefore derive both its moral authority and its developmental mandate from these Old Testament principles as it seeks to engage in community transformation today. The following section examines how the New Testament further consolidates and extends this mandate.

The New Testament mandate for community development: The ministry of Jesus and the early church

This section examines the New Testament basis for the church's mandate in community development, with particular attention to the deeds and teachings of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels, and to the practice of the early church under apostolic leadership.

The service paradigm: *Diakoneō* and its implications

A foundational text for understanding Jesus' developmental engagement is Mark 10:45, where he declares: 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many'. This statement identifies two dimensions of his earthly mission: Service and sacrificial death. The church's mandate for community development is particularly rooted in the first dimension. The Greek term rendered 'to serve' is *diakonēsai*, an aorist active infinitive of *diakoneō*, which commonly means 'to wait on tables or to care for someone's livelihood' (Weiser 1990:302). Livelihood refers to the means of securing life's necessities: Food, water, shelter and clothing (ed. Lea 2010:871). Jesus' use of this term therefore implies active concern for the material and social well-being of others, offering a model of practical service that encompasses essential dimensions of community development.

The verb *diakoneō* appears 36 times in the New Testament, 21 times in the Synoptic gospels and Acts, 3 times in John, 8 times in the Pauline epistles, once in Hebrews and 3 times in 1 Peter, with a significant concentration in the words and parables of Jesus, underscoring the centrality of service in his teaching (Weiser 1990:302). The actions denoted by *diakone*ō find their conceptual counterpart in the abstract noun *diakonia*, meaning 'service' or 'ministry', further reinforcing service as foundational to Christian discipleship and community engagement.

It is also instructive to compare *diakoneō* with the related Greek verb *douleuō*, which likewise means 'to serve', but typically conveys service rendered under authority or to a master (Weiser 1990). By contrast, *diakoneō* more strongly emphasises voluntary, compassionate and practical acts of care performed on behalf of another (Weiser 1990:302). This distinction confirms that Jesus' service was rooted not in subjugation but in self-giving for the benefit of others, a model directly applicable to the church's developmental engagement. When Jesus states in Mark 10:45 that he came to serve, he refers not solely to spiritual ministry but also to the promotion of human social well-being in its most tangible forms.

Healthcare and the healing ministry

One of the most significant ways in which Jesus engaged in community development was through his healing ministry. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as the pursuit of physical, mental and social well-being (Baltzer 2001), and medical anthropologists understand health as a person's sense of well-being within their social context (Pilch 2000). Jesus' healing ministry, as portrayed across all four Gospels, reflects precisely this holistic understanding.

Matthew presents 19 individual healing episodes along with four summary statements that describe healing as a defining feature of Jesus' mission to establish God's kingdom on earth (Robin 2020:213). These narratives, especially those concentrated in Matthew 8 and 9, portray Jesus:

> [*E*]xtending divine healing to those on the margins of society: A leper, the servant of a Gentile centurion, an elderly woman, the demon-possessed, a paralytic, a tax collector, a young girl, and the blind. (Robin 2020:214)

Through these acts, Jesus not only addressed physical ailments, but also restored social inclusion and dignity, core dimensions of community development. As Robin (2020:214) explains, healing in the gospels encompasses 'the return to physical health, the reintegration of individuals into their families and communities, the reordering of life around God, and the defeat of demonic forces'. The cleansing of a leper (Mt 8:1–4) restored the individual to the community of God's people; the healing of a paralytic was equated with the forgiveness of sins (Mt 9:2–8); and the recovery of sight (Mt 9:27–31) symbolised spiritual awakening. As Green (2007:759) notes, healing in this context 'includes both instruction and restoration to a proper state of being'.

In Mark, Jesus addresses a wide array of ailments, including fever (Mk 1:29–31), a repulsive skin condition (Mk 1:40–45), paralysis (Mk 2:1–12), withered hands (Mk 3:1–6), death (Mk 5:21–24, 35–43), chronic menstrual disorder (Mk 5:25–34), hearing and speech impairments (Mk 7:31–37) and blindness (Mk 8:22–26; 10:46–52). Within the first-century Mediterranean cultural framework, these conditions affected not only the physical body, but also the entire person, socially, spiritually and communally (Pilch 2005). In healing the woman with a chronic menstrual disorder, for instance, Jesus not only cured her physical condition but removed the stigma of ritual impurity, restoring her to full community membership and affirming her humanity. Mark's portrayal of Jesus as a teacher-healer (cf. Mk 1:21–22; 2:13; 4:1) underscores His role in restoring meaning and hope to those who had lost them (Pilch 2005).

Maddocks (1995) cautions that:

> [*T*]he detailed healings recorded in the Gospels represent only a fraction of Jesus' total healing ministry, specifically those that left a profound impression on witnesses due to their dramatic effect or the new dynamic they brought to His teaching. (p. 58)

This observation is confirmed by John 21:25, which states:

> Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Maddocks (1995) further contends that 'Jesus' concern for the holistic well-being, physical, mental, and spiritual, of individuals surpasses that of any religious leader or system, past or present', and that:

> [*I*]t is a distortion of New Testament evidence to suggest that Jesus focused more on moral instruction than on healing. Rather, healing was a central and indispensable element of His ministry. (p. 58)

Viewed through the lens of Community Empowerment Theory (Freire 1970; Zimmerman 1995), Jesus' healings can be understood as acts of empowerment, restoring individuals to their families and communities and enabling renewed participation in social and economic life. This resonates with Amartya Sen's concept of instrumental development (Sen 1999), which highlights forms of development that create the capacity for further personal and communal progress. Jesus, moreover, explicitly mandates the church to pursue this form of development:

> When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. (Lk 9:1–2)

A practical question arises: Since most contemporary church members may not possess miraculous healing ability, how can the church faithfully fulfil this mandate? Maddocks (1995:31) offers a crucial insight, observing that 'the vocabulary Jesus used to authorise healing indicates an inclusion of physical and medical practices'. In Luke 9:2, the Greek word *iaomai* is used, a classical medical term meaning 'to heal' or 'to cure', which Luke consistently applies to the healing of physical diseases. In Matthew 10:8, the term is *therapeuō*, 'to heal, to restore, or to cure', from which the modern words therapy and therapeutic are derived, and which was a common medical term in the ancient world (Maddocks 1995:32). A further significant term, *hugiainō*, appears in Luke 5:32, meaning 'to be in good health' and giving rise to the modern word hygiene; it is a fundamental term in classical Greek medical language, used predominantly by Luke, likely reflecting his background in medicine (Maddocks 1995:33). The medical vocabulary embedded in Jesus' healing mandate thus validates not only miraculous acts, but also medical and therapeutic interventions as legitimate expressions of the church's developmental mission. The church remains equipped, and indeed responsible, to engage in healthcare and wellness ministries as a continuation of Jesus' work.

Humanitarian action: Feeding the multitudes

Beyond healing, Jesus engaged in direct socio-humanitarian action, most vividly demonstrated in his feeding of large crowds. He fed approximately 4000 on one occasion (Mt 15:32–39; Mk 8:1–10) and 5000 on another (Jn 6:1–11). Barbieri (2000) illuminates the context of the feeding of the 4000, explaining that:

> Jesus went near the Sea of Galilee into the hills, where He ministered to the crowd for three days. After that, He had compassion on them because they had been with Him without food for three days. He did not want to send them away hungry. The remote nature of their location made it impossible to purchase enough food for such a large crowd. (p. 36)

In both instances, Jesus' response was driven by compassion (Mt 15:32), a compassion that translated directly into practical provision.

These acts align with what is understood today as humanitarian action. Debarre (2018:1) defines humanitarian action as 'an emergency response, the provision of life-saving assistance when conflict erupts or disaster strikes', while the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD [2017:19]) describes it as 'saving lives, alleviating suffering, and maintaining human dignity during and in the aftermath of crises'. Importantly, scholars note that (eds. Bornstein & Redfield 2011):

> [*W*]hile humanitarianism is today most commonly associated with states and international organizations, often characterized by neutrality, impartiality, and secularism, many argue that it has deep roots in religion, dating back thousands of years. As evidenced in figures such as Mother Teresa and movements like Buddhist humanitarian initiatives, *dāna* in Hinduism and Zakat in Islam (p. 5)

The word 'humanitarian' itself traces back to the early 19th century, initially describing efforts to alleviate suffering and advance human well-being, concerns not limited by national, ethnic or social distinctions (eds. Bornstein & Redfield 2011; Kusoffsky 2018).

In modern humanitarianism, a defining milestone was Henry Dunant's 1862 publication *Un souvenir de Solferino*, which exposed the neglect of the wounded in modern warfare and sparked the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the establishment of national Red Cross societies and ultimately the legal framework of the Geneva Convention (Taithe 2007:125). Subsequent milestones include the founding of the United Nations after the Second World War and, from the 1970s onwards, the expansion of humanitarian action to encompass famine relief, natural disasters and refugee crises (Davey, Borton & Foley 2013:11).

This historical trajectory, however, finds its deepest roots in the biblical record. Jesus' response to an emergency food crisis in the remote region of Galilee (Mt 15:32–39; Jn 6:1–15) represents an early and paradigmatic act of humanitarian action. Since humanitarianism is thus fundamentally a Christian ideal modelled by Jesus Christ, the church can derive a clear mandate for community development from this foundation and engage actively in social services and developmental efforts, especially in times of crisis. While the church today cannot replicate the miraculous multiplication of bread, it possesses the love and compassion that moved Jesus to act, love that, as Paul declares, 'has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit' (Rm 5:5). These divine attributes are sufficient to compel the church to seek out and mobilise the necessary resources for humanitarian engagement.

Social justice in the teaching of Jesus and the early church

The church's mandate for community development is further grounded in Jesus' teaching on social justice. Dyer and Westfall (2015:xvii) define social justice as involving 'actions that help the poor, care for the marginalised, and give a voice to the oppressed', adding that it also entails 'exposing

injustice and challenging the systems that perpetuate oppression'. They further observe that 'despite its importance, the theme of social justice remains underexplored in many academic and church contexts', and that 'given its central place in the biblical narrative, this concept deserves faithful and sustained attention from scholars who take the Bible's call for justice seriously'. Deranty (2016:1) locates social justice in the just distribution of resources arising from the economic, political, and cultural organisation of a community, while Cannon (2009:31) defines it as equitable access to opportunities including healthcare, employment and education. Wogaman (2007) further clarifies that justice calls believers:

> [*T*]o step into the stories and experiences of others, to learn from them, walk alongside them, and collaboratively address challenges as well as the external factors that contribute to injustice. (p. 221)

Jesus addressed social justice directly in his encounter with the rich young ruler, instructing him to 'sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor', promising heavenly treasure in return (Mt 19:21). Barbieri (2000:65) explains that this act of giving 'was an expression of mercy and a reflection of inner righteousness, essentially, a demonstration of justice', revealing that Jesus called the wealthy man to exhibit righteousness in its social dimension by supporting the poor.

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) offers an equally powerful illustration. A man left for dead by robbers is passed over by a priest and a Levite, but a Samaritan stops, tends to his wounds, transports him to safety and covers his care. Jesus commends this response as the fulfilment of the command to love one's neighbour, demonstrating that true love involves practical rescue, rehabilitation and social support. Luke 3:11 further articulates this principle: 'The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same'. The early church, under apostolic leadership, put this into practice: 'the believers shared their possessions so that no one was in need' (Ac 2:44; 4:32). Toussaint (2000:364) highlights that this unity was both spiritual and material, with resources distributed voluntarily according to need.

James reinforces these themes with particular directness. In James 2:1–13, he condemns favouritism, the preferential treatment of the wealthy over the poor, as a violation of the royal law commanding love of neighbour (Ja 2:8–9). In James 5:1–6, he rebukes the wealthy for withholding wages from labourers and living in luxury at the expense of the innocent. Blue (2000:832) comments that 'God is not deaf to the cries of injustice, whether they arise from wages withheld through fraud or from labourers who have been oppressed by the wealthy', reinforcing the biblical conviction that God actively hears and responds to economic injustice, holding oppressors accountable and advocating for the dignity of the poor.

Taken together, these texts present the church with both a mandate and a model for social engagement. Molina (2017:3) rightly frames social justice not as a political programme but as 'a vital aspect of the Church's partnership with God in His mission to restore creation, bringing dignity, freedom, and hope to humanity through the power of the gospel'. Social justice, in this sense, represents the incarnational expression of love for one's neighbour, the second hand, alongside evangelism, required to build a better society (cf. Ja 2:15–16).

The deeds and teachings of Jesus, together with the practice of the early church, constitute a robust New Testament mandate for community development. Through his healing ministry, his humanitarian provision, and his consistent advocacy for the marginalised, Jesus modelled a form of development that was holistic, empowering and socially transformative. The church, as his body in the world, is called to continue this work, in healthcare, in humanitarian action, and in the pursuit of social justice, as a faithful expression of the gospel it proclaims.

Historical precedents for the church's engagement in community development

The faith once delivered: A historical mandate

Before examining the historical practice of community development by the church, it is instructive to consider a key statement from Jude's epistle. He writes:

> Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. (Jud 1:3)

The word 'entrusted' translates the Greek participle *paradotheise*, an aorist passive dative feminine singular form of the verb *paradidōmi*, meaning 'to hand over' or 'to deliver'. This verb appears 119 times in the New Testament, with its highest frequency in the Gospels and Acts (Popkes 1993:18). Its use here implies that the Christian faith is something historically transmitted, a sacred trust passed from one generation to the next. The faith is therefore not only personal and spiritual, but also historical and inherited, meaning that earlier generations have already walked the path the contemporary church now seeks to tread, modelling both doctrine and practice.

This historical dimension carries significant implications. If the faith has been handed down through generations, then the practices of earlier Christians constitute footprints that can guide the contemporary church, not only in theological conviction, but also in practical expression, including community development. As Cairns (1996:22) notes, 'one of the purposes of history is to provide both guidance and motivation for the activities in which Christians engage'. The historical record of the church's social engagement thus serves both an instructive and an implicitly mandating function for the church today.

The evangelical movement in England: The 18th and 19th centuries

The historical exploration of the church's involvement in community development appropriately begins with the evangelical movement within the Church of England during the 18th and 19th centuries. These evangelicals were, as Cairns (1996) observes:

> [*L*]ess concerned with ecclesiastical polity and doctrinal debates and more focused on the practical outworking of Christianity in a redeemed life marked by piety, nourished through regular Bible study and prayer. (p. 402)

This practical orientation translated into deep involvement in various forms of social reform, efforts that are, in contemporary terms, directly equivalent to social and community development.

One of the most prominent figures of this movement was William Wilberforce, who devoted his life to the abolition of slavery within the British Empire. His efforts were instrumental in catalysing significant legal and societal transformation (Cairns 1996). More broadly, evangelicals within the Church of England succeeded in securing legislation that protected vulnerable members of society and promoted social welfare (Cairns 1996). These reforms, addressing labour conditions, child welfare, prison reform and the rights of the disenfranchised, represent a sustained, scripturally motivated engagement with community development that anticipates many of the priorities of contemporary development practice. Their work demonstrates that social transformation was not incidental to their faith but a direct expression of it.

The Church Missionary Society in East Africa

Missionary history in East Africa offers a further instructive example. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) engaged in far more than the proclamation of the gospel; they also undertook significant developmental activities across the region. As Mbogo (2015:3, 171) documents, they introduced formal education and social development initiatives that reshaped communities and laid foundations for broader human flourishing. Schools were established, literacy was promoted, and social welfare concerns were addressed as integral dimensions of missionary engagement. The CMS thus modelled an approach to mission that was holistic, recognising that genuine concern for human beings must attend to their material and social conditions alongside their spiritual ones.

The Basel Mission in West Africa

A parallel trajectory is evident in the work of the Basel Mission in the Gold Coast, present-day Ghana, where they began their work in 1828. Opuni-Frimpong (2023) documents that the Basel Mission combined missionary work with deliberate social development, establishing schools, building hospitals and introducing agricultural practices and other economic activities in their areas of operation. Their approach reflected a coherent theological vision in which evangelism and development were not competing priorities but complementary dimensions of a single mission. By addressing education, health and economic livelihood alongside the proclamation of the gospel, the Basel Mission embodied the kind of holistic community development that the church is called to pursue today.

The foregoing examples – the evangelical reformers in England, the CMS in East Africa, and the Basel Mission in West Africa – together demonstrate that community development has been a consistent feature of faithful Christian witness across diverse cultural and historical contexts. These are not isolated instances but representative expressions of a broader pattern in which the church, drawing its mandate from Scripture, has translated theological conviction into concrete social action. Embedded within these historical accounts are clear precedents that both guide and implicitly mandate the contemporary church towards similar endeavours. Community development is therefore not a modern innovation grafted onto the church's mission, but a deeply rooted biblical imperative, one that has been recognised, practised and passed down through successive generations of Christian witness.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis establishes a coherent and multilayered biblical and historical mandate for the church's engagement in community development. The Old Testament emerges not only as integral Christian Scripture, but also as a record of God's own developmental activity, providing a conducive environment for human flourishing, opposing slavery and oppression, alleviating poverty and instituting laws that protected the vulnerable, the disadvantaged and the marginalised. While the Old Testament is largely descriptive in character, it serves a normative function for the church: It reveals who God is, discloses his ways, and implicitly calls the church to walk in them.

The New Testament extends and concretises this mandate through the person and work of Jesus Christ. His healing ministry restored health, dignity and social integration to those on the margins of ancient society, acts that functioned as forms of empowerment, placing individuals on a trajectory towards holistic development. Beyond his deeds, the diverse literary forms of the New Testament, narrative, epistle and parable, together provide both explicit and implicit instruction for the church's involvement in community development, social justice and humanitarian action.

Historical Christian tradition further corroborates this mandate. The evangelical reformers within the Church of England, together with the CMS in East Africa and the Basel Mission in West Africa, consistently incorporated community development into their evangelistic and missionary activities, leaving behind a clear set of footprints for the contemporary church to follow.

Taken together, the Old Testament, the New Testament and the witness of historical Christian tradition converge in warranting, both explicitly and implicitly, the church's active engagement in community development. Such engagement is not peripheral to the church's calling but constitutes a tangible and faithful expression of the Christian faith.

Finally, the developmental footprints portrayed in the Old Testament, the New Testament and historic Christian tradition span the economic, social, environmental, and implicitly, cultural dimensions of community development. These dimensions indicate the areas in which the church must extend its ministry and engagement in fulfilling its community development mandate.

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