



Impacting the economy through worship: A framework for faith communities as agents of sustainable development

Crispen Tirivangani¹ 

¹ School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Religious gatherings in sub-Saharan Africa — among them the Mufaro of the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe, the Rufaro of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe, the Mbungu of the Zimbabwe Zion Church (ZZC), and the conventions of the United Family International Church (UFIC) — draw hundreds of thousands of worshippers each year. The economic, social, and environmental footprints these events leave behind are vast, yet they remain largely untapped as instruments of national development. Methodologically, the paper adopted a qualitative desktop research approach, combining thematic document analysis of academic literature, institutional reports, and grey literature with a structured search and inclusion strategy, triangulated across academic, governmental, and international-agency sources. The findings reveal a sharp divide between the small number of faith communities that have invested in planned, infrastructure-equipped convention sites and the majority that continue to gather in unserved bush locations, with associated deforestation, water contamination, and public health risk; they also identify pioneering models, such as UFIC's Life Haven and elements of the ZZC convention infrastructure, that demonstrate the FBEDF's feasibility. On this basis, the paper recommends coordinated action by faith community leadership, national government, and development partners, including the adoption of environmental charters, the designation of major gathering sites as development priority zones, and targeted investment in master planning and capacity-building. The paper's principal contribution to scholarship is the FBEDF itself: the first framework to integrate environmental, infrastructural, theological, and economic dimensions of faith-based development specifically for Zimbabwe's underserved apostolic and Zionist church context, extending a literature that to date has concentrated primarily on Nigerian and South African faith-based development models.

Keywords: Worship, Economy, Development, Religious, Sustainable.

INTRODUCTION

Across the African continent, religion is not a Sunday habit — it is the living architecture of society. In Zimbabwe, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, the church functions as an organising spine of communities, a primary social safety net, and in many rural areas the most powerful institution after the

CORRESPONDENCE – Crispen Tirivangani Email: trivcris@gmail.com

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state itself.¹ Annual gatherings such as the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe - Mufaro, the Zion Christian Church- Mbungu, and the conventions of the United Family International Church draw congregants in the hundreds of thousands, generating economic activity, social interaction, and environmental impact on a scale that rivals national public events.

Yet despite this extraordinary reach, the discourse on development in Zimbabwe — and in Africa more broadly — rarely centres faith communities as serious economic actors. Policymakers, economists, and urban planners tend to treat churches either as neutral background noise or, at worst, as contributors to environmental degradation, public health hazards, and social stagnation. This paper challenges that framing directly.

The relationship between worship and economic development is not merely incidental — it is structurally significant. The infrastructure required to host large gatherings, the behavioural norms transmitted through religious teaching, the land-use decisions of religious communities, and the potential of sacred sites to attract domestic and international pilgrimage tourism all represent dimensions of economic life that policymakers and development practitioners have yet to fully harness.

This paper proposes a multidimensional Faith-Based Economic Development Framework (FBEDF) grounded in six thematic pillars: (1) Environmental Stewardship and Pollution Control; (2) Water, Sanitation, and Health Infrastructure; (3) Ecological Restoration and Afforestation; (4) Infrastructure and Accessibility; (5) Theological Reorientation towards a Pro-Development Gospel; and (6) Economic Diversification through Tourism, Education, Agriculture, and Commerce. Each pillar is examined through empirical evidence, theological reflection, and practical policy recommendations.

Table 1: The Faith-Based Economic Development Framework (FBEDF) — Six Pillars

No.	Pillar	Core Focus
1	Environmental Stewardship and Pollution Control	Ending unplanned bush gatherings; reducing deforestation, soil degradation, and solid waste through planned, infrastructure-equipped sites.
2	Water, Sanitation, and Health Infrastructure	Clean water provision and sanitation facilities to prevent waterborne disease outbreaks linked to mass gatherings.
3	Ecological Restoration and Afforestation	Faith-led tree-planting and land restoration, drawing on precedents such as the Green Belt Movement.
4	Infrastructure and Accessibility	Road access and physical infrastructure connecting convention sites to surrounding regions and commerce.
5	Theological Reorientation towards a Pro-Development Gospel	Recovering scriptural teaching on stewardship, shalom, and material flourishing to counter otherworldly theology.
6	Economic Diversification	Tourism, education, agriculture, and commerce built around convention sites as anchors of local economic activity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religion as a Development Actor

The role of faith communities in development has been growing steadily in the academic literature since the late 1990s. Marshall and Marsh documented how faith-based organisations (FBOs) frequently reach populations and geographic areas that state institutions cannot.² Ter Haar and Ellis argued that African religious belief systems carry latent modernisation potential,³ while Gifford critically examined the ways in which Pentecostal prosperity theology can simultaneously empower and distort economic behaviour in sub-Saharan Africa.

¹ Katherine Marshall and Richard Marsh, *Millennium Challenges for Development and Faith Institutions* (World Bank Publications, 2003).

² Marshall and Marsh, *Millennium Challenges for Development and Faith Institutions*.

³ Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis, "The Role of Religion in Development: Towards a New Relationship between the European Union and Africa," *The European Journal of Development Research* 18, no. 3 (2006): 351–67.

More recently, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been explicitly linked to religious communities. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has partnered with the Parliament of the World's Religions to advance SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).⁴ However, much of this work remains confined to high-income countries or to large, institutionalised denominational bodies. There is a striking gap in the literature addressing indigenous, apostolic, and Pentecostal African churches, particularly those operating large outdoor convention sites.

Critiques and Limitations of Faith-Based Development

While the literature above establishes a broadly optimistic case for faith communities as development actors, a parallel body of scholarship raises significant reservations that this study must engage. Olarinmoye critically examines the prospects and constraints facing faith-based organisations in Nigeria, arguing that weak internal governance structures, limited financial transparency, and an assumption that accountability is owed to God rather than to congregants or external stakeholders constrain the developmental effectiveness of many African FBOs.⁵ In a related study, Olarinmoye documents how the absence of independent oversight mechanisms in Nigerian faith-based organisations has permitted resource mismanagement to persist largely unchecked, even where these organisations hold substantial land, financial, and human resources.⁶ Lunn, applying a critical theory lens to the religion-and-development literature, cautions against the uncritical instrumentalisation of faith communities by development actors, arguing that much of the literature treats religion primarily as a delivery mechanism for externally defined development goals while paying insufficient attention to the political economy within which religious institutions operate, including their entanglement with patronage networks and contested state authority.⁷ Gifford's critique of Ghanaian Pentecostalism, discussed above, extends this caution specifically to prosperity-oriented churches, whose theological orientation can as easily legitimise elite enrichment as it can catalyse collective development.⁸

These critiques matter directly for the Faith-Based Economic Development Framework proposed in this paper. A framework that assumes faith communities can be readily mobilised as development agents must reckon with the governance weaknesses, financing constraints, and political entanglements that the literature identifies as recurring obstacles to faith-based development in practice. This paper does not treat these constraints as fatal to the proposed framework, but it takes seriously Olarinmoye's and Lunn's caution that developmental potential and developmental performance are not the same thing, and that institutional capacity-building must accompany any theological or infrastructural reorientation.

Religious Tourism and Economic Development

Religious tourism or pilgrimage tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry. According to the World Tourism Organization, approximately 330 million tourists visit religious sites each year globally.⁹ Studies on Mecca, Jerusalem, Lourdes, Varanasi, and the Camino de Santiago all show how pilgrimage routes can anchor entire regional economies through hospitality, transport, food services, handicrafts, and cultural exchange. In the African context, sites such as the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove in Nigeria and the Coptic monasteries of Egypt demonstrate that African religious heritage is commercially viable. Zimbabwe's major faith gatherings represent an analogous opportunity that has not yet been strategically developed.

⁴ United Nations Environment Programme, "Faith for Earth Initiative: Annual Report" (Nairobi: UNEP, 2023), 7.

⁵ Omobolaji Ololade Olarinmoye, "Faith-Based Organizations and Development: Prospects and Constraints," *Transformation* 29, no. 1 (2012): 1–14.

⁶ Omobolaji Ololade Olarinmoye, "Accountability in Faith-Based Organizations in Nigeria," *Transformation* 31, no. 1 (2014): 47–61.

⁷ Jenny Lunn, "The Role of Religion, Spirituality and Faith in Development: A Critical Theory Approach," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 5 (2009): 937–51.

⁸ Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity, New Edition: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London: Hurst & Co, 2004).

⁹ United Nations World Tourism Organisation, *Global Report on Religious Tourism* (Madrid: UNWTO, 2022).

Environmental Impact of Mass Religious Gatherings

Mass gatherings, whether religious, political, or cultural, generate measurable environmental impacts, including solid waste accumulation, water contamination, deforestation, soil compaction, and carbon emissions from transport. Studies of the Kumbh Mela in India, the Hajj in Saudi Arabia, and large Christian conventions in West Africa all document these effects.¹⁰ The ecological literature strongly supports planned, infrastructure-equipped gathering sites over ad hoc bush conventions. Fixed-site facilities with proper waste management, composting toilets, borehole water systems, and planted green buffers substantially reduce per-capita environmental impact even at very large scales.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative desktop research approach to investigate the challenges that current churches face in advancing progressive development and worship within various faith communities in Zimbabwe. The methodology combined critical discourse analysis with close examination of documentary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, NGO reports, and publicly available photographic and video evidence of major religious gatherings. This approach is particularly appropriate given the sensitivity of directly observing religious gatherings in progress, where the presence of external researchers may create discomfort or disruption among congregants. The study drew on secondary data from the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, the African Development Bank, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations, in addition to peer-reviewed academic literature and published case studies from comparable faith-based development contexts across sub-Saharan Africa.

Document Selection and Search Strategy

Documents were identified through a structured search of Google Scholar, JSTOR, and the institutional repositories of the World Bank, African Development Bank, United Nations Environment Programme, and World Health Organization, using combinations of the search terms "faith-based organisations", "religious tourism", "mass gatherings", "environmental stewardship", "Zimbabwe", "Pentecostal", and "apostolic church". Searches were conducted in English and were not restricted by publication date, given the relatively recent emergence of religious tourism and faith-based development as distinct fields of scholarship; priority was nonetheless given to sources published after 2000, supplemented by earlier foundational texts (such as Mbiti, Marshall and Marsh) where these remain widely cited within the field. Grey literature, including NGO reports, government statistical publications, and news coverage of specific gatherings, was retrieved through targeted searches of the websites of the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, and the reporting archives of major Zimbabwean and regional news outlets and church social media sites.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they addressed at least one of the following: (i) the role of faith communities or faith-based organisations in economic or social development in sub-Saharan Africa; (ii) the environmental or public health impact of mass gatherings, religious or otherwise; (iii) religious or pilgrimage tourism; or (iv) empirical or statistical data on Zimbabwe's development, health, or environmental indicators. Sources were excluded where they addressed faith-based development exclusively in contexts with limited comparative relevance to Zimbabwe's apostolic and Pentecostal landscape, for example, faith-based development literature focused solely on institutional Catholic or mainline Protestant contexts in Europe and North America, or where they could not be verified against a reputable publisher, peer-reviewed journal, or recognised institutional source.

Analytical Framework and Theme Generation

Selected documents were analysed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach informed by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarisation with the documentary material; generation of initial

¹⁰ World Health Organization, "Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, and Waste Management for SARS-CoV-2, the Virus That Causes COVID-19," 2020.

codes relating to environmental impact, infrastructure, theology, tourism, and governance; searching for candidate themes across codes; reviewing themes against the full documentary set; defining and naming themes; and producing the thematic narrative presented in the Findings and Discussion sections.¹¹ The six pillars of the FBEDF emerged inductively from this process, as recurring themes converged around environmental stewardship, water and sanitation, afforestation, infrastructure, theological orientation, and economic diversification.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed following Lincoln and Guba's criteria for qualitative rigour.¹² Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across academic, institutional, and grey literature sources, so that claims regarding, for example, deforestation or waterborne disease were not dependent on a single source type. Dependability was supported by maintaining a documented audit trail of search terms, sources consulted, and coding decisions. Confirmability was pursued by grounding thematic claims explicitly in cited sources rather than researcher inference, and by distinguishing, throughout the paper, between claims supported by documentary evidence and normative or theological arguments advanced by the author. Transferability is necessarily limited, given the study's focus on the Zimbabwean apostolic and Zionist context, and readers are cautioned against generalising the findings to faith communities operating under different institutional or theological conditions without further contextual verification.

Limitations of the Methodology

This study is subject to several methodological limitations. First, as a desktop study, it does not incorporate direct field observation, interviews with faith community leaders or congregants, or site-level environmental measurement; claims regarding the specific environmental, health, and economic conditions at named gathering sites should therefore be read as informed by documentary and photographic evidence rather than as empirically verified field data, and are offered as a basis for the field-based research that this paper recommends as a necessary next step. Second, the reliance on publicly available photographic and video material introduces a degree of selection bias, as such material may disproportionately capture either exemplary or especially poor practice rather than typical conditions. Third, the qualitative and interpretive nature of thematic analysis means that the six pillars of the FBEDF, while grounded in the documentary evidence, reflect the researcher's analytical judgement and should be tested and refined through subsequent empirical research.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The Environmental State of Major Religious Gatherings

The findings reveal a sharp divide between well-resourced faith communities that have invested in permanent gathering infrastructure and the majority that continue to rely on unserved bush locations. A distinctive and widespread practice among Apostolic and Zionist Christian churches in Zimbabwe is the holding of religious gatherings in open bush areas, uncleared, unserved land that serves as a temporary camp for thousands of worshippers over several days. While this practice carries deep cultural and theological meaning, it carries severe ecological consequences that are fundamentally inconsistent with the church's own theology of creation care.

The environmental impacts of unplanned bush gatherings include the following:

- **Deforestation:** trees felled for shade, firewood, and temporary shelter, usually without replanting
- **Soil degradation:** mass foot traffic compacts soil, reducing its capacity to absorb water and support plant life
- **Water contamination:** open defecation in the absence of sanitation facilities pollutes rivers, streams, and boreholes that local communities depend on year-round

¹¹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

¹² Y. S. Lincoln and E. G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (New York: SAGE Publications, 1985).

- **Solid waste accumulation:** plastic bags, containers, and packaging are abandoned on site and enter the local ecosystem
- **Wildlife disturbance:** noise, light, and human presence disrupt local fauna, particularly where gatherings occur near wildlife corridors or conservation areas

Theological Grounding for Environmental Responsibility

The Hebrew scriptures begin with a clear affirmation that the created order is fundamentally good (Genesis 1:31), and they assign humanity not the role of dominator, but of steward (Genesis 2:15). Jesus' ministry unfolded overwhelmingly in natural settings on mountains, beside lakes, in gardens, and his teachings consistently affirmed the intrinsic value of creation (Matthew 6:26–30). The Apostle Paul, writing in Romans 8:19–22, speaks of creation itself groaning in anticipation of redemption. A church that desecrates the natural environment while preaching the Gospel of the Creator presents a profound theological contradiction. The call for churches to cease polluting is not merely a policy recommendation; it is a theological imperative rooted in the very texts these communities hold sacred.

Water, Sanitation, and Public Health

Access to clean water and adequate sanitation is one of the most critical determinants of public health outcomes. In Zimbabwe, waterborne diseases, including cholera, typhoid, and dysentery, remain significant causes of illness and death, particularly in peri-urban and rural areas.¹³ Large religious gatherings that lack adequate water and sanitation infrastructure can, and periodically do, function as vectors for these diseases, creating outbreaks that extend far beyond the gathering site as congregants return home. The 2008–2009 cholera epidemic, which killed over 4,000 people in Zimbabwe, was partly transmitted through communal gatherings and shared water sources.

The ZCC, UFIC, and PHD Ministries, among others, have made commendable progress in developing permanent or semi-permanent infrastructure for their major gatherings. These models deserve to be studied, replicated, and improved upon by all faith communities conducting mass gatherings in Zimbabwe and beyond.

Deforestation and Afforestation

Deforestation is among Zimbabwe's most pressing environmental challenges. The country loses an estimated 330,000 hectares of forest annually, driven by agricultural expansion, charcoal production, tobacco curing, and firewood demand at household and communal gathering sites.¹⁴ Faith communities, by virtue of their land holdings, organisational reach, and moral authority, are uniquely positioned to drive a national afforestation agenda. The theological framing of tree-planting as worship is not new. The Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai explicitly linked her Green Belt Movement to African spiritual traditions, mobilising thousands of women to plant over 51 million trees by connecting environmental restoration to cultural and spiritual identity.¹⁵ A similar movement, rooted in Zimbabwe's rich Zionist and apostolic spirituality, could have a transformative national impact. The use of safe, clean energy like gas should be a thing of the moment to be also considered by big institutions such as the church organisations, rather than resorting to traditional environmental hard charcoal and firewood that pollute the ozone.

Infrastructure Deficits and the Road Access Problem

Economic theory confirms that the value of a gathering site increases dramatically with its accessibility. A religious convention site reachable only via rutted, impassable roads cannot attract tourists, host medical emergencies, facilitate commerce, or fulfil its developmental potential. Faith communities should advocate persistently for the improvement of access roads to their major convention sites,

¹³ Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, *Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey 2022* (Harare: ZimStat, 2022), 18.

¹⁴ African Development Bank Group, *Zimbabwe Country Strategy Paper 2022–2026* (Abidjan: AfDB, 2022).

¹⁵ Wangari Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (Lantern Books, 2003), 31.

framing this as a matter of public interest and community health rather than merely institutional convenience.¹⁶

Theological Barriers: The Problem of Otherworldly Theology

One of the most significant barriers to faith-based economic development is theological. A substantial strand of African Christianity — particularly within Pentecostal, apostolic, and Zionist movements — emphasises spiritual salvation, miraculous deliverance, and otherworldly hope at the expense of this-worldly engagement. While the emphasis on spiritual transformation is both theologically legitimate and pastorally important, when taken to an extreme, it can produce a fatalistic disengagement from material conditions, a deep suspicion of formal education and employment, and a devaluation of civic participation. This is not a critique of the faith itself, but of a particular theological imbalance. The scriptural tradition is rich with affirmations of material flourishing, economic diligence, and social responsibility.

Religious Tourism and the Pilgrimage Economy

The ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was, among other things, a magnet for movement, gathering, and economic activity. The Jerusalem of Jesus' day was shaped architecturally, economically, and politically by the annual pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, which sustained entire industries of hospitality, trade, and transport. Zimbabwe possesses a remarkable portfolio of spiritual and religious sites from the Mwari oracle sites of the Matobo Hills (already a UNESCO World Heritage Site) to the Apostolic and Zionist convention grounds that attract hundreds of thousands annually.¹⁷ With strategic investment and marketing, these sites could attract significant domestic and international religious tourism.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that Zimbabwe's major faith communities occupy a structurally significant but largely underdeveloped position within the national development landscape. The evidence for ecological damage caused by unplanned bush gatherings is consistent with the broader literature on the environmental impact of mass gatherings documented by the World Health Organization and researchers studying the Kumbh Mela and Hajj contexts. What distinguishes the Zimbabwean case is the scale of opportunity: the same communities that currently produce environmental degradation control land, water resources, and dense social networks that could, with appropriate investment and theological reorientation, be redirected toward regenerative development outcomes.

What is particularly striking in the Zimbabwean context is that the ecological damage wrought by unplanned religious gatherings is not the product of indifference, but of resource constraints, institutional inertia, and a theological framework that has not yet internalised creation care as a sacred obligation. This distinction matters for policy and programming: it suggests that the pathway to environmental improvement runs not through punitive regulation alone, but through a sustained process of theological education, community capacity-building, and strategic investment in permanent infrastructure. When faith leaders understand environmental stewardship as a form of worship, the moral authority of the pulpit becomes a powerful instrument of behavioural change at scale.

Furthermore, the findings underscore that the developmental underdevelopment of faith communities is not uniform. A small but growing number of congregations, most notably UFIC and segments of the ZZC, have demonstrated that the transition from bush gathering to a planned, infrastructure-equipped convention site is both achievable and financially self-sustaining once the initial investment is in place. These pioneering congregations function as proof-of-concept models whose replication across the broader faith landscape could, within a decade, fundamentally alter Zimbabwe's environmental, health, and economic development trajectory. The challenge for policymakers and development partners is to create the enabling conditions that allow these models to be adopted widely rather than remaining exceptional.

¹⁶ Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, "Zimbabwe Tourism Performance Report 2023," Harare: ZTA, 2023.

¹⁷ Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, "Zimbabwe Tourism Performance Report 2023, 5"

The FBEDF proposed in this paper integrates environmental, economic, theological, and infrastructural dimensions in a manner that existing frameworks, which tend to treat faith-based development either as purely social service delivery or as a function of formal denominational institutions, do not. The framework is especially relevant to independent, apostolic, and Zionist churches that have been underserved by development research yet represent some of the largest voluntary organisations in Zimbabwean civil society.

The six-pillar architecture of the FBEDF is not arbitrary. It reflects the interconnected nature of the challenges that faith communities face when attempting to transition from passive occupants of land to active architects of development. Environmental stewardship cannot be achieved without water and sanitation infrastructure; tourism cannot flourish without road access and ecological restoration; economic diversification cannot take root without the theological reorientation that legitimises worldly enterprise in the eyes of congregants and leaders alike. The framework therefore demands to be read holistically: partial implementation attending to infrastructure, for instance, while neglecting theological formation is unlikely to yield sustainable outcomes. Development within faith communities, as within nations, is systemic or it is superficial.

It is also worth noting that the FBEDF does not presuppose a top-down, externally driven development model. On the contrary, its most critical pillars — theological reorientation and environmental stewardship — must be owned from within the faith community itself if they are to be effective and durable. External actors, whether government agencies, international NGOs, or academic researchers, can provide technical assistance, financial resources, and regulatory frameworks. But the transformation of a church's relationship with the land it occupies, and with the economic potential of its membership, must ultimately be catalysed by the convictions of its own leaders and the aspirations of its own congregants. This inside-out model of development is consistent with the best of the participatory development literature and with the communitarian ethos that characterises African ecclesial life.

A central tension in the literature between prosperity gospel orientations that risk theological distortion and the genuine developmental potential of faith communities is addressed directly by the framework's fifth pillar: theological reorientation. This is not a call to secularise African Christianity, but to recover the full range of the scriptural tradition's engagement with land, labour, community, and the material world. Scholars such as Gifford have rightly cautioned against naïve optimism about faith communities as development actors;¹⁸ this paper does not dismiss those cautions but argues that the risks of inaction continued ecological damage, missed tourism revenue, untapped educational and agricultural potential are greater than the risks of engagement.

Implementing the FBEDF is not without significant risk, and the framework's viability depends on confronting four interlocking challenges directly. The first is governance: as Olarinmoye's research on Nigerian faith-based organisations demonstrates, many African churches lack the independent financial oversight, reporting structures, and lay participation in decision-making that large-scale infrastructure and tourism development would require; without deliberate governance reform, the same institutional weaknesses that produce today's environmental neglect could equally undermine tomorrow's development investment.¹⁹ The second is financing: master planning, water and sanitation infrastructure, and road access all require capital outlays well beyond the tithes and offerings that sustain most congregations' routine operations, and the framework's success will depend on the availability of blended finance arrangements involving government, development partners, and, where appropriate, commercial investment.

The third is political dynamics: because several of the denominations discussed in this paper operate within a Zimbabwean political landscape in which religious leaders' proximity to, or distance from, state power carries consequences, any government partnership envisioned under the FBEDF's second pillar must be designed to protect the doctrinal and organisational independence of faith communities from partisan capture. The fourth is institutional capacity: environmental auditing, tourism

¹⁸ Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity, New Edition: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy*.

¹⁹ Olarinmoye, "Faith-Based Organizations and Development: Prospects and Constraints"; Olarinmoye, "Accountability in Faith-Based Organizations in Nigeria."

marketing, and agricultural enterprise management require technical skills that most church administrative structures do not currently possess, making the capacity-building components of the recommendations below not peripheral but foundational to the framework's success. None of these challenges is disqualifying, but a framework that does not name them risks the same naïve optimism that Gifford warns against.

The theological reorientation called for in this paper draws on a rich scriptural tradition that has often been overshadowed by eschatological and miraculous emphases in African Pentecostal and apostolic preaching. The Old Testament vision of shalom — a Hebrew concept encompassing not merely peace but wholeness, flourishing, and right relationship between people, communities, and the created order — provides a comprehensive theological foundation for development engagement. Nehemiah's reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls, Joseph's economic management of Egypt's grain reserves, and the prophetic tradition's relentless insistence on justice for the poor and the land all constitute a scriptural warrant for the kind of this-worldly, materially attentive ministry that the FBEDF envisions. Zimbabwe's faith leaders need not look outside their own sacred texts to find authorisation for economic activism and environmental responsibility.

Moreover, the tension between spiritual fidelity and developmental engagement is not unique to African Christianity — it has characterised every major religious tradition that has grappled with modernity. What the history of Catholic social teaching, Islamic economics, and Buddhist development practice demonstrates is that theologically grounded development frameworks are not only possible but often more durable than secular equivalents, because they draw on reservoirs of moral motivation, communal accountability, and transcendent purpose that purely technical or financial frameworks cannot replicate. The FBEDF invites Zimbabwe's faith communities to claim their place in this global tradition of religiously motivated development not by imitating external models, but by articulating a distinctively African, distinctively Zimbabwean theology of economic and environmental engagement.

The comparison with successful models in Kenya (Green Belt Movement), Nigeria (faith-based Agrihubs), and South Africa (institutional church development corridors) suggests that the FBEDF is not merely theoretical but is grounded in demonstrable regional precedent. Zimbabwe's particular combination of large convention site landholdings, dense congregational networks, and urgent national development needs creates a compelling case for targeted policy intervention.

Each of these regional precedents offers a specific and instructive lesson for the Zimbabwean context. Maathai's Green Belt Movement demonstrated that environmental transformation driven by spiritual and cultural identity is not only possible but scalable: beginning with a handful of women planting trees in Nairobi's outskirts, it grew into a continental movement that planted tens of millions of trees and earned its founder the Nobel Peace Prize. Nigeria's faith-based Agrihubs have shown that the land assets of large congregations can be converted into productive agricultural enterprises that feed communities, employ youth, and generate income for institutional development without compromising the spiritual mission of the church. South Africa's church development corridors, particularly in the Cape Winelands and Gauteng, illustrate how formal denominational institutions can anchor mixed-use development zones that combine worship, education, commerce, and social services on a single site.

Pentecostals in Zimbabwe are therefore not being invited to pioneer an untested experiment. They are being invited to contextualise and scale a model that has already demonstrated its viability across the continent. What is required is the political will to designate faith community sites as development priority zones, the institutional capacity to support master planning and environmental auditing, and the theological courage of church leaders to reframe development not as a distraction from the Gospel but as one of its most faithful expressions. If these conditions are met, Zimbabwe's annual religious gatherings, already among the most remarkable expressions of voluntary collective action in southern Africa, could become the foundation of a faith-driven national development renaissance that scholars, policymakers, and practitioners across the continent will study and seek to replicate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Faith Community Leadership

- Adopt and publish a Faith Community Environmental Charter committing to zero-pollution gatherings, tree planting, clean water provision, and proper sanitation at all events.
- Establish a Development and Infrastructure Committee within each major denomination, tasked with overseeing the physical development of gathering sites.
- Commission a comprehensive audit of the environmental, health, and economic footprint of each major convention, using findings to set baselines and improvement targets.
- Develop a five-year master plan for each major gathering site, integrating accommodation, water, sanitation, roads, commercial, agricultural, educational, and tourism infrastructure.
- Formally incorporate pro-development theology into the training of all ministers and church leaders.

For National Government

- Designate major religious convention sites as Special Economic Development Zones, eligible for investment incentives, infrastructure support, and planning facilitation.
- Partner with faith communities on road infrastructure serving major convention sites, framing this as a community development investment with broad public benefit.
- Include religious tourism in the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority's national tourism development strategy, with specific targets, budgets, and marketing campaigns.
- Develop a regulatory framework for large religious gatherings that sets minimum standards for water, sanitation, waste management, and health infrastructure, with enforcement mechanisms and compliance support.

For Development Partners

- Fund feasibility studies and master planning processes for the development of major religious convention sites as integrated development anchors.
- Support training programmes for faith community leaders in environmental management, tourism, business development, and educational administration.
- Include faith-based development actors in national development planning processes, SDG implementation frameworks, and climate adaptation strategies.

CONCLUSION

The argument of this paper is simple but consequential: the church in Zimbabwe and across sub-Saharan Africa is too large, too powerful, and too deeply embedded in society to be treated as a peripheral actor in national development. When hundreds of thousands of people gather in one place under common spiritual leadership, something happens that governments, markets, and civil society organisations struggle to replicate. The question is what that gathering does to the land it occupies, to the health of its participants, to the economy of its surrounding region, and to the consciousness of its worshippers.

At present, the answers to these questions are mixed at best and troubling at worst. Too many gatherings leave degraded landscapes, polluted water sources, and unhealthy conditions in their wake. Too many sermons transmit an otherworldly theology that dulls rather than activates economic agency. Too much land, water, and organisational capacity sit underdeveloped when they could be anchoring schools, clinics, farms, and markets. But there are genuine bright spots. The Mbungu site, UFIC's Life Haven, and elements of the ZZC convention infrastructure demonstrate that intentional development investment by faith communities is possible, viable, and valued by their members. The pilgrimage economies of the world's great religious destinations remind us that spiritual gathering and economic development are not merely compatible; they are synergistic.

The thesis of this paper is ultimately an invitation: to the prophets and bishops and pastors who lead Zimbabwe's faith communities, to the policymakers who shape national development strategy, and to the development partners who fund transformation, let us recognise the church as the economic actor it already is, and help it become the developmental force it is called to be. In the words of Proverbs

11:14: 'Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counsellors there is safety.' May our gatherings in Mufaro, Rufaro, Mbungo, and beyond — become places not only of spiritual encounter, but of economic flourishing, ecological restoration, and national transformation.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Crispen Tirivangani (Rev.) is a PhD candidate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where his research focuses on New Testament Parables and the intersection of faith, community development, and economic transformation in sub-Saharan Africa. He serves as Deputy Chaplain at Midlands State University, Zimbabwe, and is an ordained Pastor of the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe. His work bridges practical pastoral ministry and academic inquiry, with a particular interest in how African faith communities can become relevant change agents.