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Poverty Alleviation in Churches in Africa: a Case for a Strategy Steeped in Christian Discipleship

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Abstract

This article presents a theoretical and theological examination of behavioural poverty, arguing that the underlying theories used to explain poverty often shape the nature of the solutions proposed. It contends that addressing behavioural poverty should be central to the church's poverty alleviation efforts, as it can generate significant impact independent of state or societal cooperation. The study proposes a philosophical reorientation that situates ministry to the poor within the church's disciple-making mandate, employing a two-tiered strategy that prioritises transformation within the faith community while extending compassion to others. The model integrates context-sensitive strategies, structural and accountability systems, renewal of the mind, and objectives that transcend self-interest, portraying poverty alleviation as a transformative discipleship journey that turns former receivers into self-sustainers and givers.

Introduction

There is broad agreement that poverty is a critical problem that demands solutions. Theories used to explain poverty, however, often determine the types of solutions that are proposed. Some scholars favour a unidimensional (or hybrid) measurement of poverty, defining it mainly as falling below the poverty line that reflects the average income level of a community (Ravallion,

2020:185). Others, however, prefer a multidimensional approach that views poverty as the result of multiple forms of deprivation (Fragoso, 2025:248). The multidimensional perspective attempts to capture and analyse a wide range of variables that contribute to poverty, though this can be complex and difficult to manage. This is because, as argued by Duclos and Tiberti (2016:1–3), some of the features of multidimensional studies, such as the way poverty and inequality are linked, may work well in a one-dimensional context but not in a multidimensional one.

Another perspective emphasises vulnerable communities. Here, poverty is understood as powerlessness in the face of misfortune or crime, leaving individuals and groups dysfunctional, ill, damaged, exploitable, and deprived in many ways (Tucker 2021:146). This view stresses how a person's social context can condition them into a state of deep helplessness, creating a poverty trap in which both the conditioning and its environment reinforce deprivation (Barrientos 2007). In this sense, poverty produces vulnerability, but vulnerability also prevents individuals or households from escaping poverty, perpetuating the cycle (Iorhen 2021:188).

Brady (2019:155–175) offers a more structured framework by grouping poverty's contributors into three broad categories: behavioural, structural, and political. Behavioural theories stress individual responsibility and decision-making. Structural theories highlight demographic patterns and labor market dynamics that shape both behaviour and poverty. Political theories focus on the influence of power and institutions in generating poverty and regulating the interdependent relationship between poverty and individual behaviour.

Though everything contributing to poverty matters, contributions of behaviour appear to be within the power of the individual to overcome with support from the church. Additionally, helping people to change values and behaviour through Christian discipleship accord with the mission of the Church (Matt 28:18–20). It is, therefore, plausible for the Church to make helping the poor to overcome behavioural issues associated with poverty its focus, without withdrawing its voice from solutions discernible from other causes of poverty. However, in order to do this, the church must get beyond the impasse produced by the debate as to whether values and behaviour do play a significant role in poverty entrenchment.

Why Values and Behaviour Matter in Poverty Alleviation

There have been questions about whether behaviour and values contribute to poverty. Some scholars see no relationship between behaviour, values, and poverty, arguing that such associations "blame the victim" for conditions produced by unjust social structures. Dorey (2010:333–343), for instance, rejects attributing any responsibility to the poor, seeing it as undermining compassion. Jones and Ye (1999:439–458) similarly argue that there is little evidence connecting values or choices of the poor to their poverty.

However, the Book of Proverbs often link poverty to behavioural choices such as laziness (6:9–11, 10:4, 19:15, 20:13), rash or unwise actions (11:24, 14:23, 21:5, 28:19), failure to heed instruction (13:18), and drunkenness (23:20–21) rather than purely external circumstances. When individuals and families are plagued by these dysfunctions, they sometimes become a deficit passed down through generations. This transfer of values perpetuates a culture where opportunities for learning and behavioural changes are scorned, leaving individuals and families less empowered to succeed.

Doss (2011:148–152) identified three categories of poverty causes: (1) those due to individual choices, (2) those partly linked to choices, and (3) those beyond individual control. This suggests that if bad choices are minimised or eliminated, the economic situation of the people would be positively impacted. Kakwata (2020:101–119) put it differently by referring to poverty as having individualistic, structural, and beliefs components. These descriptions locate poverty not only externally but also in what happens inside of a person's mind, which may also be passed from generation to generation.

One of the ways in which values and behaviour help entrench poverty is highlighted in the theory of Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty (IGT). Bird and Higgins (2011:9) described IGT as "the private and public transfer of deficits in assets and resources from one generation to another." They clarify that such transfer is not a simple "package" but occurs through a complex interplay of unhelpful and harmful influences that shape people's likelihood of becoming poor. Harmful influences include a fatalistic worldview that demotivates a strong work ethic, values that prioritize for magical solutions

and living for the moment, wrong attitude to knowledge, and the belief that government owns the responsibility for their welfare.

The importance of addressing behaviours, wrong values and practices, and poor decision-making extends beyond individuals to leadership at all levels. Burnham (2007:617–619) argues that corruption-driven choices by community and national leaders often explain why intervention programs fail. DeLisi and Wright (2019) also highlight more than fifty years of social science evidence showing that behaviour is a key predictor of life outcomes. They warn that denying the role of behaviour deprives the poor of opportunities to break free from poverty. Similarly, Vass Gal (2015) identifies destructive cultural values as drivers of generational poverty and social exclusion.

Some argue that social exclusion is the problem and not behaviour. Umeji (2020:16–17) considers it not only the major cause of poverty but also the determinant of its severity, defining it as the denial of participation in society despite one's willingness to be included. Yet, willingness may not suffice if individuals refuse to conform to community or workplace norms. Althammer (2014:1–2) reinforces this by noting that social inclusion is largely contingent on adapting to dominant cultural values, since societies function within shared norms and attitudes.

My observations suggest that antisocial values, destructive behaviours, and poor choices contribute significantly to both social exclusion and poverty among the informal settlement dwellers of Mende, Lagos. As Powledge (2011:558) explains, repetitive behaviours form learned patterns with generational consequences, creating social and even epigenetic conditions that align with Bird and Higgins's (2011:9) concept of transferred deficits. These deficits pose major challenges to the effectiveness of poverty alleviation programs that consist mainly of giving things or money to the poor. Unless churches confront and transform the underlying worldview and values contributing to poverty entrenchment in communities, their interventions are likely to create dependencies rather than lead to exit from poverty.

Another significant issue among some poor people is the philosophy of fate which aligns with a fatalistic worldview. Wu, Chen, and Ng (2020:3) describe a belief in fate as embracing a life in which event outcomes are already

predetermined by external forces. According to this description, those who believe in fate are likely to think that power outside of themselves already determined for them a destiny of poverty in a way that they can do nothing about either to prevent or change it. This is the case with some poor people I have personally interacted with in Lagos. Hakim (2019:150) found a correlation between the fatalistic attitude of a fishing community in the Philippines to their "weak instrumental values," that is, weakness in their commitment to and pursuit of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that would have improved outcomes. Additionally, fatalism or belief in fate makes people see themselves as victims. Victim mentality is known to produce in people attitudes of distrust, aggressiveness, destruction, egoistic choices, and anti-team spirit (Gollwitzer, Süssenbach, and Hannuschke 2015:2). These characteristics are presented as the building blocks of social exclusion, the lack of agency, and the wait for outside forces to fix everything.

How will any church poverty alleviation program that does not address the worldview and values of a people crippled by these pathologies succeed? Samir (2019) makes the case that alleviation practices based on simple handouts to the poor treat the poor as an object rather than the subject of development, eventually creating dependencies. Studies suggest that some sub-Saharan African countries conditioned by over-reliant on aid have slipped into dependency, corruption, market distortion, and deepening poverty, with nothing left except the need for more aid (Ogundipe, Ojeaga and Ogundipe 2014:301). It does appear that the same reasoning is true of both individuals and families that live on handouts and churches must extend help to the poor in ways that discourage dependence.

Correspondingly, Sunshine (2012) presented a biblical approach to poverty alleviation as that of a partnership in which those who have, help the needy with context-sensitive opportunities to improve their lot. The poor also have the responsibility of utilising efficiently such opportunities given to them. Efficient utilisation of such opportunities by the poor would require among other essentials, a right belief system that encourages the right choices and a strong work ethic. Such a correlation between beliefs and behaviours has been shown by Davis-Kean et al (2008) to be increasingly important as responsibility grows.

The Bible contains ample promises that the Lord intends to prosper his children by blessing the work of their hands (Deut 2:7, 14:26, 15:10, 16:15, 24:19, 28:12, 30:9). It, therefore, follows that a view of God as one who will bless without work is a challenge to the churches attempts to alleviate poverty. Unfortunately, where work is not embraced as God's primary means of providing for people, the resulting inefficient use of opportunities and recurring failure might sometimes be wrongly interpreted by the poor as fate.

Biblical Principles on Poverty Alleviation

Ephesians 4:17-32

This passage may be said to have three broad outlines. First, the Ephesian Christians were not to walk any longer as the rest of the gentiles walk: with a futile mind, spiritual death, hardened conscience, and bodily sensuality (vv. 17–19). Second, they were to follow Christ as one that has learned Christ by replacing the old with the new (vv. 20–24). Third, specific examples of negatives to put off and positives to put on are listed. The Ephesians were to lay aside falsehood and speak truthfully to each other because they have become members of one another. They were to be angry but not sin and not let the sun go down in their anger because the anger that stays long will give place to the devil. They were to stop stealing and begin working what is good with their own hands so they can support others who do not have. They were also to put off unwholesome talk and speak what is edifying to others because unwholesome talk grieves the Holy Spirit. And lastly, they were to put off all kinds of vices and be kind to one another, forgiving one another because that is how God forgave us in Christ (vv. 25–32).

The principle taught here is that for Christians, "living this new life means turning our backs on our former life of sin and embracing the new self that has made us a part of Christ's new creation" (Osborne 2017:51). When this principle is applied specifically to stealing as a former way in which some Ephesian Christians met their needs, the change will be working with their hands what is good (v. 28).

The need to put off wrong behaviour

It is said that stealing was normal and characteristic of that time and because many jobs were seasonal, during off-seasons people would steal to survive (Merida, Platt, and Akin 2014:112). Edward (2005:168) agrees and presents stealing as a persistent sin for which correction was applied by the Apostle. For Kitchen (2002:87), the expression, "let him that stole steal no more" does not necessarily mean that there were thieves among them; it could be a way of speaking to inspire industry. Cohick (2010:66) on his own part asserts that the instruction to stop stealing implies that some of them were stealing from their employers, but he suggests that a selfish craving for a life of ease and not poverty may have been the motive. Osborne (2017:56) disagrees with the motive put forward by Cohick and suggests that the poor most likely yielded to the temptation to make ends meet through theft and asserts that "the solution is to work, doing something useful."

It seems most probable that stealing was a means employed by some people in order to have what they lacked. To the Christian converts within this population Paul wrote, urging them to practically disengage from the old habit of stealing to meet needs. The consequence of faith in Christ is a new life that manifests in the abandonment of the old ways and embracing the new. The change commanded was not based on transformed external circumstances but on transformed life in Christ.

The argument by Haque and Muniruzzaman (2020) that changed circumstances must precede changed lives is not supported by Paul's instructions to the Ephesians. Rather, the new ethic of working to meet needs instead of stealing is simply a result of one becoming a new person in Christ (Neufeld 2002:213).

The need for a new work ethic

What were the poor to do? The answer is "working with his hands what is good" (Ephesians 4:28, NKJV). Again, Osborne (2017) point to the term "good" as signifying the benefit of the work for the community with the implication that it is such work that glorifies God and benefits the church. Merida et al (2014:111) however does not link it directly with benefit for the community but with the morality of the worker as an honest and good steward. Both views seem to be intended by the apostle when he instructed the former thieves to

work with their hands what is good. The poor should engage in honest labor that is beneficial to themselves and the community in ways that demonstrate proper stewardship of God-given resources.

The apostle's instruction to work may have been a reminder that we were created for good works and that work is a gift from God. Merida et al (2014) assert that people should work, not just because we were created for good work, but also because of the practical need to work. Paul showed this need to work when he refused to be a burden to others but rather worked to meet his needs (1 Cor 9:15, 18; 1 Thess 2:9) ,and also when he said, "the one who is unwilling to work shall not eat" (2 Thess 3:10 NIV).

The practical need to work also reveals the real-world implications of not working. The writer of Proverbs captured this real-world implication:" those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies will have their fill of poverty" (Proverbs 28:19 NIV). Not working is likely to result in poverty, which may also induce a temptation to steal to make ends meet.

Hoppe (2006:5) alleges that "it is the wealthy who create and maintain their poverty". Admittedly some wealthy people do oppress the poor and keep them in poverty, but not all poverty situations are like that. In many cases, it appears that the poor could begin the journey out of poverty by making a few quality choices. Kakwata (2020:101–119) observes that poverty has individualistic, structural, and belief components. The Apostle Paul's command that people start working with their own hands seems to be predicated on the fact that the poor have the capacity to do something for themselves.

The need for right motivation

The command to work with their hands seems to transcend the need to only meet one's own needs. Most importantly, it reflect the duties of the new life of doing good (Edward 2005:165). Such good consist of embracing the fact that humans were created to work. It is good to work, and work is God's way of meeting people's needs (Merida et al 2014:112–113). In this way the motivation will transcend self to "have something to give him who has need" (Ephesians 4:28 NKJV). Ambrose is quoted as saying that God's command to the Christian goes beyond refusing to steal to a life of care for the poor from

his own hard work. (Edward 2005:168–169). Such a heart disposition may place the poor in a position to make efficient use of opportunities that may abound.

It is God's will that the poor who have become a new creation in Christ should shed the old ways of stealing to meet needs and embrace a new way of honest labor doing works that benefit society. This should be done with a motivation that transcends meeting one's own needs to caring for the poor.

In a nutshell, the Ephesian Christians were instructed to no longer live as the rest of the Gentiles live because they have become new persons in Christ. They were to put off the old life and put on the new in line with how they have learned Christ. Doing this called for intentionality on the part of the believer to practically put off what is of the old life and put on what is of the new life. It is within this context that former thieves were commanded to steal no more but rather to engage in honest labor and participate in taking care of others. However, as expected in every community of people, there may be people who might not take the command to work seriously. What should a community of faith do in such a case?

2 Thessalonians 3:6–15

In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, Paul sets out to prescribe how to treat the unruly (v. 6), a revisit of previous instructions and renewed charge (vv. 7–12), and how to discipline in love (vv. 13–15) (Elias 1995:317–328).

The Thessalonian Christians were commanded to discontinue associating with the unruly (v. 6). This command is given in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, signifying the authority back of this command (Menken 1994:129). The call to stay away is also repeated in the fourteenth verse. The King James Version identifies this group as the"disorderly", while the English Standard Version identifies them with "idleness." The New International Version combines the attitudes represented by these two translations and renders it "believer who is idle and disruptive." One of the important facts about this group is that they did not follow the previous instructions and teachings of the apostles on proper work ethics.

The apostle and his companions, by neither being idle nor eating others 'food without paying for it, but by working hard that they might not be a burden to others, taught the Thessalonians how to live (vv. 6b-9). In their earlier times in Thessalonica, the apostle and his companions had modelled a lifestyle of discipline and sacrifice. The expression "for you yourselves know" (2 Thess 3:7 ESV), suggests an intimacy with the facts presented and is intended to jog the memory of the community (Elias 1995:320). The Thessalonian Christians were expected to follow this example (vv. 7, 9).

Apart from instructing them through his lifestyle, the apostle had also taught them with words. He referred them to instructions he had given before that, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess 3:10 ESV). Another previous instruction concerning an attitude to work is also evident in Paul's first epistle.

> But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one (1 Thess 4:10b-12 ESV).

Inferences drawn from both 2 Thess 3:10 and 1 Thess 4:10b-12, suggest that the apostle and his companions may have discovered during their first visit a serious need to correct the work ethics of the people (Elias 1995:322). Consequently, concrete actions to correct this indiscipline had to be applied as implied by the apostolic instructions, "keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness" (2 Thess 3:6 ESV), "have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed" (2 Thess 3:14 ESV), and "if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess 3:10 ESV).

Such actions were to be implemented in an atmosphere of love and not vengeance because the erring people are not enemies but brothers and sisters (v. 15). The obedient ones were encouraged to persevere in their adherence to the apostle's instructions in the atmosphere of love without becoming weary (vv. 13–15).

Second Thessalonians 3:6–15, therefore, point out the fact that Christians ought not possess attitudes that could be described as disruptive and unruly. Such attitudes negatively impact on one's work ethics and must not be encouraged. And the community of faith has the duty to lovingly discipline those who persist in disobedience (Howell et al 2015:246). What is the implication of this lesson in a local assembly and how might it help us discern the will of God for the poor?

Refusing to work is wrong

First of all, Howell et al (2015:249) note that Paul's use of the imperfect verbal tense in the injunction "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat," suggesting a repeated issuance of this command in previous times. "Those who refuse this directive must be subject to the discipline of the church." (Howell et all 2015:249) Osborne (2018:72) notes that this set of people have been warned severally in the past and that the apostle is now calling on not just the leaders but the whole congregation to enforce accountability. Holding people to account does not in any way preclude the need to care for the poor within the church. For Osborne (2018), the idlers with whom Paul was concerned were not poor but indolent. Not only do they produce nothing while consuming what others produce, but they also negatively impact the productivity of others by be busybodies (2 Thess 3:11). Their idleness has become the proverbial "devil's workshop" in ways that made the apostle forbid orderly brethren from associating with them (2 Thess 3:6, 14–15).

Some have acknowledged that we can't know for sure what precipitated this bad behaviour since Paul does not mention of the origin of the problem (Osborne 2018). Giszczak (2021:97) observes that "the connection between idleness and eschatology is not made anywhere in the Thessalonian correspondence" and should therefore be discarded. Bridges (2008:254) agrees but contends that it might have been a social problem within a professional body of artisans in which if one fails to work, it negatively impacts all the others. Elias (1995:322) disagrees with Bridges position and assert that evidence from First and Second Thessalonians suggest that Paul noticed the need among the populace for a direct teaching on a change of attitude about work and even saw the need to model it for them right from their first encounter. Consequently, the exhortation to work in his second epistle is a

revisiting of an old problem of bad work ethics already captured in 1 Thess 4:11 (Adeyemo 2006:1466).

It, therefore, seems more likely that Paul met an appreciable number of Thessalonians in a disorderly state and commanded them to change (Elias 1995:322). Having become new creations through the gospel preached by Paul, he now demands that they live by Christian ethics and work to earn a living. Should they refuse to heed the apostolic command and continue to be idle and unruly, the church was supposed to hold them to account by withholding from them the fruit of others' labour.

The church must hold idlers to account

The command to deny food (2 Thess 3:10) and even friendship (2 Thess 3:6) have been considered by some as too harsh. Bridges (2008:193) refers to the change in the tone of the second epistle when compared to the first epistle as a reason to dispute Paul's authorship of the book. But, as observed by Adeyemo (2006:1468),"laziness is such a serious matter that it necessitates disciplinary action on the part of the church." This may account for the change in tone.

What was so serious about the situation in the church in Thessalonica that the apostle prescribed such a disciplinary action? Bridges (2008:255) says it is because the unproductive lifestyle of the unruly affects the well-being of the whole group. Osborne (2018) agrees that the unproductive lifestyle of the unruly affects the whole church, but disagrees on why they should be disciplined. For Osborne, they are to be disciplined because they are disobedient to an official teaching of the church for which they have been reprimanded severally. Adeyemo (2006:1468), however, views the issue of laziness as so serious that it warrants a drastic action of discipline to help encourage change.

Whatever may have been the reason for the call for discipline, Paul considered it serious enough to model a counterculture from the beginning, labouring to supply his own needs in order to give them an example to follow (2 Thess 3:7–9; Acts 20:35).

Paul's instructions in 2 Thess 3:6–15 clearly suggest that idle and unruly people in the church are deserving of a different kind of support, that is, discipline borne out of love. Though those who refused to work were not described as poor, the practical implication of not working is poverty (Elias 1995:326). The discipline commanded by the apostle could therefore be seen as a loving corrective measure that may help to prevent the poverty that could result from their lifestyle.

Galatians 6:1–10

Some scholars see Galatians 6:1–10 as a loose collection of instructions that are unrelated to preceding chapters (Soards and Pursiful 2015:305). But Platt et al (2014:121) disagree. To them, Gal 6:1-10 is a continuation of the discussion on the Spirit-filled life in chapter five, outlining practical steps for Spirit-filled living within the faith communities. The first ten verses of Gal 6 details how Christians should live out the Spirit-filled life in their congregations (Brunk III 2015:168).

A Spirit-filled person should help restore one overtaken in a fault in the spirit of gentleness and humility (v.1). In this way they fulfil the "law of Christ" by helping to bear one another's burden (v. 2). Spirit-filled persons are to avoid prideful thinking about self (v. 3). Rather than comparing their works with others, they should compare them with what their best effort could have produced (v. 4). Everyone needs to be mindful of their duties and take responsibility for them (v. 5).

Spirit-filled living within the community also means that members of the community support their ministers by catering for their needs (v. 6). Sowing to the Spirit is bearing one another's burden as prescribed by the apostle and going against it is sowing to the flesh. Either practice is sure to receive a just recompense from God (vv. 7–8).

Paul ends with an encouragement to the Galatian Christians to persevere in giving, knowing that there will be a reward in due season. Platt et al (2014:133) note that the phrase "for in due season we shall reap" (Gal 6:9 NKJV), though largely eschatological, may also be fittingly applied to this life. This would mean that individuals and congregations that keep on doing good can both expect

earthly, as well as eternal, blessing from God. Soards and Pursiful (2015:319) disagree that the blessing refers to anything material, arguing that refers only to a harvest of the fruit of the Spirit. Judging that God has promised both material and spiritual blessings in this life, the harvest promised in this scripture could refer to both.

The apostle also instructs:“ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith (Gal 6:10 NKJV). This instruction from the apostle is both general and specific. It connotes that generally we should do good to all. Dorcas ’ministry to the widows at Joppa (Acts 9:36–43) is a good example of doing good to all, as Paul directs. According to Martin (2006:114), Saints Bede and Chrysostom present Dorcas ’acts of mercy as an intercession beyond words and a monument beyond any physical memorial respectively. In other words, such good done to all within the society is in itself a towering witness to the love of Christ towards all members of the society.

Others, like Chance (2007:163), consider the beneficiaries of Dorcas' charity to be only other disciples of Christ. Bradly opines that the statement “when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive” (Acts 9:41b NKJV) does not “imply that the widows are not saints, but brings attention to the fact that these women who had relied on Dorcas now have her back.” It seems most likely that the use of the expression “saints and widows” instead of “widows” underscored a lack of total homogeneity in the group. This would mean that Dorcas served non-Christians as well, thereby fulfilling Paul’s call to do good to all while also paying a special attention to fellow believers.

The apostle was also specific; in addition to doing good to all, more careful attention should be paid by Christians to their own faith community (Platt et al 2014:134). Some scholars see the universality in the call to do good and the specific focus on the household of faith as a mark of Paul’s inconsistency (Soards and Pursiful 2015:319). Similarly, Esler (1998:233) is not sure how much weight should be given to Paul’s call for generosity towards people outside the community “given his preoccupation with life inside the communities and the heavily negative stereotypes he applies to all those outside.”

On the other hand, Brunk III (2015:174) argues that the apostle's instruction to prioritise the faith community in doing good is not just because the church has such limited resources so it cannot take care of everyone all at once, but also because it is consistent with the New Testament picture of the church as a city on a hill and, therefore, an example to the nations. In other words, the church's ministry to the world begins by being a model of the good that the world can see and copy. In this case, the church has the duty of giving a "high priority to the quality of its internal life and practice" as a way of modelling community as God intended. Following the same line of thought, Osborne (2017:73) calls it "two levels of giving" and argues that "though we are to love every neighbour," the image of the church as a family demands a "retention of a special affection for our brothers and sisters in Christ."

We may, however, conclude that the idea that the church should seek to aid all irrespective of their disposition to God is taught by scripture and that it may be expressed in a general giving as we seek to love our neighbour as ourselves. Yet, the scripture also calls for special attention to members of the faith family and this may be carried out within a local congregation as a part of general Christian discipleship.

The study of Galatians 6:1–10 can be summed up with these words. Spirit-filled living is expressed by bearing one another's burden in humility and sharing what we have with others without getting tired. However, when it comes to how we should share with others, the apostle gave a clear call for the church to prioritise the members of the church family over the general public (vv. 9–10). This priority must be captured in any strategy for poverty alleviation adopted by the church.

Proposed Strategy: How the Churches may Respond

Drawing from Scripture's teachings on poverty alleviation, along with insights on how worldview, values, and behaviour contribute to the persistence of poverty, a biblically aligned strategy is proposed to address the underlying causes. This strategy is presented in two parts: a general framework and an implementation plan.

General strategy

Reframe poverty alleviation as a disciple-making ministry

Churches care for the poor has been largely on humanitarian grounds. While this is commendable, there must be an equal emphasis on the discipleship component. This is a significant gap because Paul's instructions that the church "do good to all, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10) and to hold members accountable points to discipleship rather than mere charity. It also aligns with Christ's mandate to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20).

Kraft (2016:419) questions the prevailing idea of "impartiality" in faith-based humanitarian work, noting that evangelical Christians working among Syrian refugees in Lebanon found it difficult to separate material aid from the refugees 'spiritual needs. Their conviction was that while material needs are temporary, spiritual needs are eternal. Therefore, if poverty alleviation is not designed with the recipients 'spiritual needs in mind, transformation of beliefs and behaviours necessary for lasting development may be limited. For example, a fatalistic worldview, negative attitudes toward knowledge, and poverty-reinforcing behaviours often present among the poor can be challenged and corrected through intentional discipleship.

Therefore, churches should pursue poverty alleviation as an integral part of Christian discipleship—one that fosters both belief transformation and behavioural change. Practical steps include restructuring poverty alleviation programs as sub-departments of the church's discipleship ministries, preaching sermons about work and poverty alleviation, producing discipleship manuals that address poverty-related issues (e.g., work ethics, financial discipline, self-control, choices, faith, and family responsibilities), and ensuring that accountability is embedded in the process. In this way, poverty alleviation moves beyond temporary relief to become a transformative disciple-making process. However, such a shift requires not only a new philosophy but also a restructured system of implementation.

Build structures for discipleship-oriented poverty alleviation

Most churches have a welfare committee or department, but these are generally focused on short-term relief—receiving donations and distributing

them to those in crisis. By contrast, the apostles in Jerusalem emphasised remembering the poor (Gal 2:10) and established structures to ensure fairness in food distribution among widows (Acts 6:1–7).

For sustainability, welfare ministries must therefore function as part of a church's discipleship or Christian education ministry. When repositioned this way, volunteers and leaders see themselves not just as relief workers but as ministers engaged in a permanent and strategic arm of the church discipleship infrastructure. This perspective warrants specialised training tailored to poverty alleviation within a disciple-making context. Such training builds capacity for producing context-sensitive discipleship resources and promotes expertise that can be shared with other churches. Given the limited time and human resources available in many churches, this structural shift is necessary to guarantee continuity, effectiveness, and replicability in ministry to the poor.

A two-tier model with clear goals

In the early church, ministry to the poor focused primarily on believers (Acts 2–6; Gal. 6:10). By the fourth century, however, churches had achieved sufficient stability to extend their ministry to non-believers as well. This reflects Paul's principle of "doing good to all, especially to the household of faith." Following this biblical model, churches today should adopt a two-tier approach. A short-term goal of meeting urgent needs in the wider community (e.g., distributing food or clothing) and a long-term goal discipling and empowering poor members of the faith community to rise from poverty and, eventually, to help others do the same.

Short-term outreach can also serve as a "filtering" strategy, identifying those willing to embrace discipleship for spiritual and material growth. Long-term goals, however, require clear expectations of commitment—regular attendance at discipleship sessions, completing assignments, responsible financial behaviour, positive feedback from employers, and an overall disposition toward learning. This two-tiered approach ensures both compassion for all and intentional investment in those who demonstrate readiness for holistic transformation.

Invest in the renewal of the mind

Sustainable transformation begins with a renewed mind (Rom 12:2). In informal settlements in Lagos, common obstacles to addressing poverty include fatalism, victim mentality, misplaced reliance on magical solutions, and poverty-reinforcing habits. Church-based discipleship must therefore incorporate biblical teaching that directly confronts these mindsets. Poverty alleviation committees should research community worldviews, identify gaps, and develop Christian education resources that emphasise biblical perspectives on work, justice, ethics, family, humility, endurance, and integrity.

Since poverty affects not only material circumstances but also mental and spiritual outlooks, the poor may require intensified discipleship to overcome the compounded effects of poverty. This process also serves as a filter, distinguishing those willing to submit to accountability and transformation from those unwilling to engage.

Establish accountability systems

Discipleship is both relational and accountable (Hull 2006). Relationships without accountability lack fruit, while accountability without love becomes harsh. Effective discipleship balances both. Schedler (1999:17) defines accountability as the obligation to report actions, justify decisions, and accept consequences for misconduct. Similarly, Grant and Keohane (2005:29) emphasises the need for standards, judgment, and sanctions. Applied to poverty alleviation, churches must establish policies and procedures that govern their ministries and communicate clear expectations for participants and enforce them consistently.

This aligns with Paul's directive to the Thessalonians to deny support to idle members while encouraging the weak (2 Thess 3:10–15). Accountability ensures that limited resources are directed toward those committed to transformation, while success stories inspire others to follow suit.

Context-sensitive engagement for sustainable growth

Effective poverty alleviation must adapt to context (Paffenholz and Jütersonke 2008:8). Context-sensitivity does not compromise biblical principles but applies them wisely to unique local realities. Many poor families struggle with

basic needs such as food, healthcare, rent, school fees, etc. If these needs are unmet, micro credit loans from the church intended for business may instead be diverted, undermining training outcomes. A context-sensitive strategy might involve providing temporary allowances for essentials while simultaneously supporting business development. During this period, all business income could be supervised and saved until the allowance is phased out.

This approach addresses three issues. It prevents misuse of business funds for household survival, safeguards family stability and health, and instills frugality and financial discipline in beneficiaries. Though seemingly costly, the filtering process ensures that resources are invested only in committed participants. Over time, churches can celebrate "graduates" who move from being recipients to givers—helping others exit poverty.

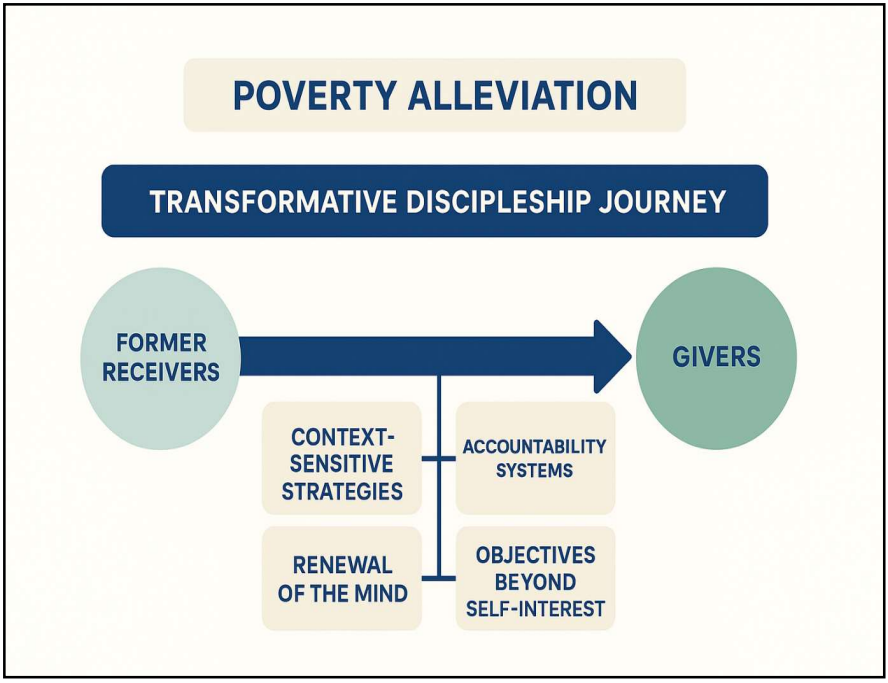

Figure 1

Implementation Strategies

Vision casting for the whole congregation

For a poverty alleviation program to succeed, the entire church—not just the wealthy few—must be mobilised. In the New Testament, giving was a shared responsibility across social classes: Jesus praised the poor widow's gift (Mark 12:41–44), believers in Antioch gave collectively (Acts 11:27–30), the Macedonians contributed despite "extreme poverty" (2 Cor 8:1–5), and the rich were instructed to be generous (1 Tim 6:17–19).

A practical way to inspire broad participation is by instituting an annual Wealth Creation Sunday Service. The term wealth creation is intentionally chosen to signal a shift from dependency on receiving to purposeful work that meets needs and creates value. On this Sunday, the pastor or the individual responsible for poverty alleviation can articulate God's intention to bless the work of his children, enabling them not only to achieve self-sustenance but also to become a blessing to others.

The service could also provide an opportunity to present the church's poverty alleviation program, including its objectives, methods, and impact, while clearly communicating the need for congregational support. Members would be invited to participate through prayers, skills, and financial pledges toward the program.

Subsequent Wealth Creation Sunday services can serve as graduation ceremonies for beneficiaries who have successfully exited poverty. These gatherings can celebrate achievements, share testimonies of transformed lives, and renew calls for partnership and donor support, reinforcing a culture of productivity and shared responsibility within the church community. These events not only reinforce congregational commitment but also attract other poor community members to enrol and persevere in the program. For credibility, success stories must be validated against transparent, objective criteria, ensuring both accountability and integrity.

Establish objectives beyond self

Another critical strategy is cultivating an outward-looking vision among participants. When Paul instructed Ephesians to "work with their own hands,"

his goal was not self-sufficiency but generosity: “that he may have something to share with those in need” (Eph 4:28).

Christian love, described as the greatest enduring virtue (1 Cor. 13:13), naturally expresses itself in seeking the good of others (John 15:13). Moreover, scripture consistently links generosity with spiritual and material blessing (Gal. 6:9; Luke 6:38; 2 Cor. 9:6).

Thus, participants must be encouraged not only to exit poverty themselves but also to contribute to helping others. This creates a self-sustaining discipleship movement where beneficiaries become benefactors. Asking those just emerging from poverty to give is not unreasonable—Paul commended the Macedonian churches, who gave generously despite deep poverty, as models for others (2 Cor 8:1–7).

In this way, the program instills Christian love, fosters faith in God’s provision, and perpetuates a cycle of transformation that involves the whole congregation.

Define success criteria

Clear criteria for success must be established from the outset. Scholars distinguish between success criteria (what defines success) and success factors (what enables success) (Lamprou and Vagiona 2018:227). Success criteria should be based not on conventional project management metrics (time, cost, quality) but on alignment with the program’s ultimate goals: assisting the poor to permanently exit poverty and enabling them to contribute toward helping others out of poverty. These goals reflect biblical teaching that believers should work productively, live responsibly, and have resources to share (Eph 4:17–32; 2 Thess 3:6–15; Prov 6:6–11; Gal 6:1–10).

Key success factors include two essential elements: (1) privileges - adequate financial and material resources made available to participants and (2) responsibilities - participants ’commitment to training, accountability, and discipleship. While resource availability can be objectively measured, assessing participants ’growth requires evaluating their beliefs, values, habits, and character. Ultimately, observable fruit—consistent with Jesus ’standard in Matt 7:15–23—must serve as the measure of success.

Make periodic evaluation

Evaluation is necessary to determine whether the program is being implemented as designed, whether objectives are being met, and how improvements can be made. Fleischman and Williams (1996:2) framed this with three guiding questions: Are we doing what we said we would do? Are participants learning what we set out to teach? How can we improve curriculum and processes?

The Stufflebeam (2007) CIPP model—Context, Input, Process, Product—is especially useful here. Context: assess whether program goals align with the needs of the poor in their specific context. Input: evaluate whether resources (time, funds, curriculum, personnel) are sufficient and well used. Process: examine how effectively activities are implemented (e.g., attendance, feedback, follow-through). Product: measure outcomes against success criteria—have participants exited poverty, adopted new behaviours, and begun helping others? This model ensures evaluation is not only summative (judging outcomes) but also formative, providing feedback at every stage for continuous improvement.

Conclusion

The proposed model for church-based poverty alleviation begins with a philosophical shift: placing ministry to the poor firmly within the disciple-making mandate of the church. This requires a two-tiered approach that prioritises the faith community while still extending compassion to outsiders. The model emphasises context-sensitive strategies, accountability systems, renewal of the mind, and objectives that go beyond self-interest. It envisions poverty alleviation as a transformative discipleship journey that produces givers out of former receivers.

Implementation involves mobilising the whole congregation through vision casting, setting clear success criteria, and maintaining rigorous evaluation. Ultimately, effectiveness depends on aligning privileges (support given) with responsibilities (discipleship commitments), ensuring that outcomes reflect both biblical values and sustainable development.

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