Connecting religious transnationalism and development: charitable giving amongst Zimbabwean Catholics in London

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that religious transnationalism amongst diaspora members shapes engagements with their homelands through charitable giving. Religious networks connect migrants to their homeland through constant interactions with the mother church and its members. Using the case of a Zimbabwean Catholic Christian community in London, the article takes forward debates about religious transnationalism, charity and development, arguing that religious networks infuse and underpin a transnational sense of diasporic belonging amongst migrants. They underpin not only in situ support within hostlands but also a plethora of engagements in the homelands, involving significant flows of material resources into church and community development projects and humanitarian relief. This demonstrates the important role religious formations play in aid and development, challenging assumptions of development’s secularism. While the literature illustrates the importance of religion within development, it has yet to fully engage with what ordinary people seek to do when confronted with the global disparities of the modern world. Additionally, these transnational charitable engagements sit in between individual remittances and organised charities and can sometimes be motivated by the differences between the so-called Global North and South. The article therefore contributes to the growing literature demonstrating the complex interactions between religion, religious practice, charity and development.

Introduction
In this article, I examine the interactions between religion, religious practice and development through exploring the multidimensionality of religion (Counted (2019) and how it offers opportunities and platforms for migrants to engage with their homeland – in this case through religious transnationalism. I argue that religion amongst London-based Zimbabwean Catholic diaspora members shapes transnational engagements with the homeland through charitable giving. Religious networks give migrants an opportunity to feel and act out their

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sense of on-going connections to the homeland, through this charitable giving. However, this giving can be both altruistic and also self-interested in some instances. These engagements with the homeland sit in between individual remittances and organised charities and are based on the experiences of religious migrants in their hostland. Individual remittances have long been shown to contribute to homelands and in some cases allow diasporas to influence home, and over the past several years, billions of dollars have moved transnationally in the form of financial remittances (Ratha 2007, 2011, 2013; UN 2019; World Bank 2021). Notwithstanding, African Christian diasporic communities, in addition to these financial remittances, contribute to their homelands through religious giving in informal charitable ways such as the one discussed in this paper. To demonstrate my argument, I provide an overview of Zimbabwean diasporic religious engagements with the homeland and elaborate the specific case of the Zimbabwean Catholics in London, commonly known as ‘ZimCatholics’, and how they used their religious networks as a vehicle for transnational charitable giving. The specific initiatives I elaborate on in this article were mainly confined to the Catholic institution and followed religious doctrines about giving.

The article argues that religious networks infuse and underpin a transnational sense of diasporic belonging amongst Zimbabwean migrants. They reinforce a plethora of engagements in the homelands, involving significant flows of material resources into church and community development projects and humanitarian relief that exemplify the interconnections between religious practice and development. Secondly, the article extends debates around African Christian diaspora groups’ conceptualisations of development, which are based on their privilege of living in a high-income country, a place where they occasionally experience, or are imagined to experience, a better life than those at home, and how this evokes a sense of primary obligation to the homeland as they compare themselves to those they left behind. This shows us how this form of localised aid can bridge disparities where they become more noticeable, as it doesn’t necessarily follow broader development goals and, in some cases, challenges it. Finally, this article contributes to debates on African diaspora’s faith communities and their engagement in development through transnational contributions to homelands that are still scant (also see Ademolu 2020). It also adds a dimension to the literature on religion and development through profiling ordinary religious people’s actions when confronted with the global disparities of the modern world, something that the literature on religion and development does not pay much attention to. By so doing, the article contributes to the growing literature on demystifying and challenging normative assumptions of international development’s secularism (Clarke and Jennings 2008; Clarke 2008; Deneulin 2013, Jennings 2013, Ademolu 2020).

The material for this article draws from a broader multisited research project on transnational activism conducted in Britain and Zimbabwe, with analysis of the Zimbabwean Catholics in London and its network being one component (Mutambasere 2020). I draw specifically here from a detailed study of Zimbabwean Catholics in London in 2017–2018, with five months spent in London as a participant observer with the congregations at their place of worship. Here, I attended the monthly service in addition to engaging with the community outside the church service during their various guild meetings, and also with individuals. The data used here comes from both field notes whilst observing as a participant and interviews with key informants. I also spent another five months with members of the network or ‘beneficiaries’ on the ground in Zimbabwe, tracing the initiatives as well interviewing the beneficiaries and coordinators. Research in Zimbabwe was conducted in Harare.
and surrounding areas where beneficiaries were mostly located. I conducted 10 interviews with key informants within the congregation in the UK, including office bearers, and another 10 with its associated network in Zimbabwe. Participants were selected through observation and key members were sampled, including snowballing from these particular members mainly in the UK. Selection was made based on a representative sample of individuals who had been part of the charity committee (which I discuss further below) and general members of the congregation. As a member of the congregation myself, I also possessed prior knowledge of some of the individuals, which made accessing them easy. To protect the participants’ identities, their names have all been pseudonymised, and no data contained in this article can be traced back to them. Participants in Zimbabwe were selected based on the networks of activity that I was tracing from the UK to Zimbabwe, and interviews were carried out with members who have benefitted from or had assisted in identifying and distributing charitable support. Multi-sited ethnography allowed me to tease out the dynamics of complex networks of engagement and the relationships between religion, transnationalism and development. Analysis of the data was done as part of the broader multisited research project on transnational civic activism, using a grounded approach (Mutambasere 2020).

The article sets out first with a review of the literature on religion, transnationalism and development, teasing out major debates and how they relate to Zimbabwean Catholics in the UK. This is followed by an introduction to Zimbabwean Catholicism in London, allowing me to outline the diversity and visibility of the formalised transnational religious giving by Zimbabwean Catholics through examining the initiatives that were taken by the church, including motivations. Showing the connections between faith-based giving and the need to support only the homeland, the final section discusses further informal versions of faith-based giving in which congregants took part and how those, too, exemplify religious transnationalism and development but also desires to maintain a stake in the homeland.

**Religion, transnationalism and development**

Recent scholarship has shown the important role migrants and diasporas play in development, including the contributions they make in their homeland that can be financial and beyond remittances (see Brinkerhoff 2011, 2014; Skeldon 2014; De Haas 2010; Mutambasere 2021). The literature shows how diasporas have created vehicles to invest in their homelands, through hometown associations for example (Gonouya 2012; Mercer, Page, and Evans 2013; Lamba-Nieves 2018). Furthermore, the role diaspora philanthropy and humanitarianism play is likewise attracting significant noticed, given different responses to crises in migrants’ home countries (Flanigan 2017; Ahmed and Asquith 2020). Others, like Levitt (1998), refer to social remittances that are about ideas, behaviour and social capital. Social capital is interesting here too, as some of the initiatives of these migrants are based on trust, benefit and indeed networks (Portes 1998). What this article argues is that in addition to these individual remittances, and organised associations, there is a rather informal sector of transnational charitable giving based on religious networks that is also contributing to development.

Before delving further into the article, it is important to elaborate how development is used in the paper. I use ‘development’ here not as conventional, mainstream development (see Horner 2020) but as development from below (Adogame 2016), or localised aid (Roepstorff 2020), which sometimes does not seem to follow any broader goals about
developmentalising countries and is more microscopic and specific to particular areas and communities. Adogame (2016, 11) argues that new concepts of human and sustainable development enable us to explore ‘vital aspects of people’s lives that are not limited to economic connotations of development’ (Adogame 2016, 11), and these include religious charitable practices that are localised – localised in the sense that they are peer-to-peer and based on what is available in communities, yet with development implications like alleviation of poverty, disaster relief and social support, among others. In this sense, it is not about development discourse understood as top-down approaches that are normally linked with foreign aid or bilateral agreements, *inter alia*, that are usually associated with Truman’s 1949 Point Four Speech (Haustein 2021). Additionally, as Adogame (2016, 4) points out, ‘religion is a human meaning-making activity or enterprise that is intricately linked to other spheres of development, social progress and human flourishing’. Everyday lived religious dimensions of life that are sometimes practised through charity are also important to the understanding of development, and paying attention also to how these religious communities understand development can help our conceptualisations of development. This paper therefore adopts the view that development from below also constitutes these methods of charitable giving and relief action from person to person that are non-hegemonic or not top down and that contribute to human development.

A rich body of literature now exists that connects religion to transnational economic, cultural and social issues (see Levitt 1998, 2007; Mahler and Hansing 2005; Pasura 2012). Religion in this paper is understood from a Durkheimian perspective as ‘something eminently social, providing social cohesion, control and purpose for people, as well as allowing individuals to interact and reaffirm social norms’ (Abdulla 2018, 105; Durkheim and Swain 2008). Such an understanding therefore opens religion up as a prism to understand social norms, cohesion and purpose, brought in by transnationalism amongst migrants in this case. African Pentecostal churches, for example, have profoundly reformed African Christianity and transformed religious landscapes in global contexts, helping to spread gospels of prosperity that mesh with migrants’ aspirations to gain wealth that are popular with most churchgoers (Biri 2014). Some studies of the Catholic Church in relation to diasporic communities have emphasised how faith fosters remittances from the diaspora to the homeland due to embeddedness, altruism and the idea of ‘good deeds’ (Levitt 2007). Ademolu (2020, 11) proposes that ‘development in this reconstituted and metamorphosed understanding suggests a certain palpability, dynamism, adaptability, and multidimensionality which transcend development’s secular, technocratic definitional limitations’. This is because religious faith identities are also fundamental in recognising how African diaspora understand the challenges of life in their homelands in addition to how they respond to it (Ademolu 2020).

Furthermore, Ademolu (2020, 4) argues that religion is ‘intimately tied to and implicated in transnational activities’, but how these religious identities shape diaspora actors’ interpretations and justification of development’ has rarely been forefronted. Religion and development is a sub-discipline of international development that has been growing over the past years. Bompani (2014, 14) contends ‘religion and development was born out of the need to develop concepts and analytical tools, along with theoretical frameworks, that would help with our understanding of the role of religion in affecting people’s behaviour and decisions’. She adds that ‘religion and development implicitly seek to provide answers and practical solutions to practical problems, primarily through developing a much more nuanced and
holistic understanding of the complex interactions between religion and religious practice, and international development (Bompani 2014, 16). The literature on religion and development emerges from the debates about faith-based organisations and how development institutions were partnering with such organisations (Clarke and Jennings 2008; Olson 2008). These debates have evolved from arguments around lived faith experiences to whether religion is an enabler of or hindrance to development (see Haynes 2001; Ter Haar and Ellis 2006; Lunn 2009), with a focus on the benefits of religion in encouraging mobilisations towards causes. This body of scholarly work clearly outlines the importance of religion and its influence on development. However, its focus is on religion and faith-based organisations within the context of a country or community (see Bornstein 2003), and the debates do not extend this framework of understanding to diasporic religious giving particularly in the context of small and informal forms of charitable giving.

Of importance here also are the on-going debates in the literature regarding development as a concept and the role religion plays in it. Haustein (2021, 33) argues that religion has played an important role, contending ‘development hardly emerges as a normatively secular enterprise of scientific modernism, but as rooted in a long history of Christian activism, “civilizing”, and providentialism’. Again, these debates are largely about development at a macro level – the more mainstream, top-down approaches. Similarly, in a report published in 2014 on religion and development post-2015, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) draws attention to the fact that religion and faith are important in the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as religious actors may be shaping or impacting upon emerging agendas (UNFPA 2014). It goes on to profile how faith is a ‘terrain where justice, peace and the struggle against inequality interface’ as well how ‘faith actors are capable of social mobilization that can shift attitudes and behaviours towards those more conductive to sustainable development’ (UNFPA 2014, 2). This demonstrates the value placed on religion by development agencies themselves. Despite this, Tomalin, Haustein, and Kidy (2019), in their paper on religion and the SDGs, show the role that faith-actors have been playing in the SDGs, and one of their recommendations is to bring them in as development partners. Haustein and Tomalin (2021, 301) go on to critique the SDG agenda as hegemonic, arguing that religious communities are indeed recruited to ‘deliver progress in the name of the SDGs’ but in most cases have had no input in shaping the targets or goals. What we are still not seeing here are the smaller initiatives undertaken by individuals who are encouraged by religion to engage in charity and development, thereby assisting those who may be left out by these broader development goals.

Through being in a space where they feel they are economically privileged, diasporic religious groups feel obligated to give back to the homeland more as they are constantly intertwined with the homeland. Machoko (2013, 484), in his study of the Zimbabwean diasporic communities in Canada involved in Zimbabwean African Indigenous Religion (ZAIR), contends that they ‘have a religious and cultural leg in Zimbabwe and a financial and material leg in Canada wobbling between Zimbabwe and Canada’. Diaspora religious groups therefore engage in transnational development initiatives via contributions to other communities within the church in Zimbabwe. However, there is another side of this, as transnational sacred remittances can act as a form of proxy in the homeland for those in the diaspora but at the same time be ‘embedded in landscapes of status and power’ (Garbin 2018: 14). As Garbin (2018, 14) notes, since remittances are a ‘currency of status, they can often unsettle
hierarchies, create intra-group tensions or increase dependency and inequalities. This is an important point to keep in mind, given that the charitable giving in which Zimbabwean Catholics in the UK are engaged is within transnational religious networks, which might leave out other members of the wider Zimbabwean community. Much like what Garbin (2019) found regarding remittances to gain spiritual favours (and as I will discuss further below), Zimbabwean Catholics in London also engaged in charitable donations in some instances to maintain a stake in the homeland, and sometimes the choice of recipient was motivated by self-interest.

In order to make the faith-based connections with the homeland clear, I build on the notion of religious transnationalism defined as ‘a process by which immigrants forge and sustain their religious practices and identities across borders’ (Mensah, Williams, and Aryee 2013, 312). I contend that religious transnationalism encourages them to engage with and impact the homeland socially in important ways, particularly via religious charity. These interactions are made possible by the transnational religious networks that migrants find themselves a part of. Churches additionally can give migrants a sense of belonging as they allow congregants to engage in the same activities that they did before leaving the homeland – for example, being part of guilds in the Catholic Church, attending services in the mother tongue, etc. – which can encourage diaspora groups to come together for a common cause (Biri 2014; Pasura 2012). Additionally, Levitt and Jaworsky (2007) argue that the flows of people, money and social remittances within the spaces of churches are so dense and widespread that non-migrants’ lives are also transformed, even if they do not move.

**Zimbabwean Catholics in London**

The Zimbabwe Catholic Community of England and Wales (ZCCEW), also known as ‘ZimCatholics’, was founded in 2001, within the context of a surge in arrivals due to political and economic upheaval in Zimbabwe. Though ZCCEW covers both England and Wales, data for this paper was collected at the main centre/chaplaincy of the community in London. This is a pertinent case study because it demonstrates the importance of religion and transnational networks for Zimbabwean migrants and illustrates informalised religious charitable engagements. When asked why the chaplaincy was formed, the former chaplain, who himself is also Zimbabwean, argued this was because

> religion and spirituality are very important to a vast majority of them [Zimbabweans]. It is undeniable from my experience. It is that big to such an extent that even the Church of England, the Anglican church has Zimbabwean ministers who cater to the Zimbabweans.3

What the former chaplain says here shows how important religion is to Zimbabweans in the UK in general and how important it was in connecting Zimbabweans to their home since the Zimbabwean fellowship took direction from the mother church. This also shows the religious ties that Zimbabweans have with their homeland and, in this case, that Zimbabwean Catholic members in London have with their mother church in Zimbabwe as they worshipped led by priests appointed from Zimbabwe. These ties and interactions encourage comparisons between migrants’ lives in the UK and the lives of their family and colleagues in the homeland as they follow the same sermons, sing the same songs and are reminded of their time at home. They additionally attempt to balance resource demands between
transnational ties and negotiating membership in their new place of residence in order to belong and feel connected to both the homeland and host country. Through these constant comparisons and encounters with the homeland that are aided by religious transnationalism, UK-based Zimbabwean Catholic Church members develop conceptualisations of development that are based on reminders of the homeland. This is because they feel a sense of privilege from being resident in a high-income country, and their faith encourages them to give back primarily to Zimbabwe. Mrs Moyo, one of the respondents, used a proverb to describe their understanding that ‘charity begins at home,’ which suggests that although they may reside in the UK, Zimbabwe is still home, and therefore if they are to give, they will give there first.

Mass was celebrated in chiShona and isiNdebele at the London chaplaincy once every month, usually the first Saturday of the month. Even though mass was celebrated once a month, this was a vibrant community which had various events and initiatives occurring alongside church services. Members of this congregation belonged to different guilds, which met between the church services. They also belonged to multiple generations, young and old, with higher numbers of those middle-aged and above, and the majority of them residing in Greater London as well as its surrounding areas since their arrival from Zimbabwe in the early 2000s. There was a representation of both genders although women made up the majority of the congregation and took leadership in some of the initiatives. The chiShona/isiNdebele mass was strongly valued by numerous attendees: for some, it brought them closer to God whilst at the same time bringing them together with other Zimbabweans in the diaspora where they could commiserate about culture shock, raising children in a different context and general life in Britain. Mass was followed by a lunch consisting of Zimbabwean food, which was an opportunity for congregants to socialise and speak the familiar Zimbabwean vernacular languages, giving everyone a sense belonging within the host country.

A perusal of their social media pages reflected an array of videos and photos of congregants celebrating weddings within the Church, as well as sad moments, for example the untimely death of the former UK based chaplain in October 2017 after his relocation to Zimbabwe. It was evident that the community also supported even those congregants who are in Zimbabwe during trying times, as members of the centre went back to Zimbabwe for the former chaplain’s funeral, evidencing close ties with homeland. There were multiple other ways in which the church fostered transnational connections with Zimbabwe at the same time as it nurtured social support within the diaspora. One way the congregation maintained and reinforced transnational relationships with the homeland church was through the annual singing courses for new hymns in vernacular language coming from the mother church in the homeland. As diaspora congregants, they were required to submit any new hymns they composed to the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop’s Council (ZCBC) for approval before they could teach them to their entire diaspora-based congregation, thus continuing to work under the guidance of the homeland church, which shows a direct transnational connection.

Religious transnationalism here aided and reinforced both a sense of belonging and active practices of engagement in both hostland and homeland. Furthermore, the fact that these congregants were in the ‘diaspora’ meant that they were imaginatively and physically in a different space from the homeland congregations. Constant interactions with the mother church and its members in Zimbabwe served as a reminder of the situation at home and, therefore, could also underpin their desire to help out in their home country.
‘There is more happiness in giving than receiving’: diasporic church aid in the homeland

Religious organisations can channel diasporic finance through religious institutions, which are able to provide a sense of continuity, stability and trustworthiness, despite some ‘wobbliness’ (Machoko 2013). I argue here for the importance within the diaspora of giving to people mainly back in the homeland in Zimbabwe, showing how the Zimbabwean Catholics in the UK would rather give to the homeland first than to the host country. Their priorities and loyalties regarding charitable giving lie first and foremost with Zimbabwe, aided by the constant engagement they have with the homeland. I also reveal the level and scale of the giving, which were quite tremendous. This giving, though it may resemble charity in general, is religious as it is confined to Catholic circles, and it follows religious doctrines about giving, as this section will show. Additionally, as the rest of the article will demonstrate, the donations made were mainly to Catholic beneficiaries, schools, other congregations, orphanages and even seminaries. Unlike hometown associations, which dominate the literature, this case study shows that diaspora groups can also have a specific loyalty to the homeland, and not a specific community or city. In addition, religious giving in this case complements the remittances that diaspora members send to the homeland as these are sent directly to the families. This giving impacts the homeland in important ways and helps alleviate the negative effects of the economy in addition to having developmental benefits.

The giving was underpinned by religious notions, particularly from the Bible. A conversation with one of the respondents revealed this, as he argued:

we are all guided by the Lord’s teachings, and in Acts 20:35, the good book says there is more happiness in giving than in receiving. As the Lord gives us life and breath and all things, so too do we to our brothers and sisters at home who are not in the same position as us here.  

What is clear from the quote above is how the teachings of the Bible inspired the giving. At the same time, it is also clear that the respondent felt that the diaspora were somewhat privileged and therefore needed to act in response for those at home who were not in a similar position. Notwithstanding, there are certain choices the diaspora members made that diverged from broader development agendas and ethics, and this is because while diasporic faith-based giving is an altruistic gesture for the collective good, it is also self-interested in some ways as it can operate through personal networks, can be used to support family members and works to give diasporic communities an on-going stake in the society at home.

Due to the transnational nature of the London centre, from the outset, members of the church were already involved in some micro-level and loosely coordinated charitable projects in Zimbabwe fostered by individuals’ personal connections that were taking place amongst the parishioners. These actions already show us that when faced with global disparities, religious communities act. The year 2008 saw the formalisation of the chaplaincy’s charity work. There were many factors that led to congregants eventually creating an overarching charitable goal. Mr Chishamba, who once sat on the treasury committee, argued that the initiative grew from the fact that the centre was receiving a lot of support financially and in kind, arguing
we have so many members here who are accountants for example, and they can help the church balance its books and create a stable financial structure which is transparent, in addition to the donations people give to the church and tithes.8

The decision to form the charity committee was underpinned by the logic that more impact would come from collective rather than individual efforts. Accordingly, in 2008, the chaplaincy managed to get a 20-foot container which they filled with different types of goods, from bed linen to books, clothes, wheelchairs and electric appliances.9 It is important to point out here that these were goods that the congregants could collect and put together, not necessarily what had been requested or was most needed in Zimbabwe. So, unlike conventional development assistance, where some form of a needs assessment would have been done prior, this was not the case. Most congregants I spoke to argued that in the UK, goods that are still in great condition are sometimes thrown out or recycled simply because they have reached their use-by date or have been updated. These collections also show the congregants' own understanding of charity/giving and what they think was more pertinent. This type of giving can be likened to more localised versions of aid or, as Schnable (2021) argues, amateur aid, which is grassroots based, flowing within communities and sometimes based on what is available. Nonetheless, they collected the goods, arguing they would be quite useful for those in the homeland. Mr Fashamu, who led this initiative, stated:

We would ask parishioners to make contributions, to give us donations, gratis donations with no stipulated amounts. We would then tell the congregation how much it would cost to send the container back to Zimbabwe (around £4000 to ship) and also a list of the items we would have collected. We could then give each of the eight dioceses in Zimbabwe a little something from there. Some of the stuff would go to seminaries and we would ask for support from congregants on specific calls. Some goods we funded directly from the community account of the centre which we managed.10

The initiative was so popular amongst Zimbabwean Catholics and other Zimbabwean diasporans in the UK, including those who were not a part of the church, that it became an enormous project albeit entirely voluntary. It was individual giving but giving directly to Zimbabwe, the homeland, and via the collective organisation of the church. This in part was supported by the religious belief that ‘charity begins at home,’11 home for most being the country of origin, Zimbabwe in this case, where they had spent most of their lives before migrating, but also based on the general feeling of responsibility towards the homeland church by the Zimbabwean Catholics in London. Suffice it to say here that given the amount of money it cost to ship the second-hand goods to Zimbabwe, participants argued that the goods were more expensive and sometimes not available in the country. Arguments can also be made here about how informalised versions of charity can resemble top-down aid and development approaches given that there was no contact with the mother church prior to this, regarding finding out their needs. Though this kind of giving can disrupt conventional development, it can also suffer the same consequences regarding power relationships, as recipients in this case did not have a choice but to accept what had been sent. However, as we shall see below, this began to change as the giving became more formalised at the chaplaincy through the formation of a charity committee.

The spontaneity and enthusiastic nature with which the chaplaincy members gave reflected the strength of diasporic and national identity, and a huge desire to contribute to the homeland driven by faith and religious ethos. When I asked one of the respondents what
this meant for them, they quoted a Catholic Shona hymn in response: ‘It is as we sing […] pane chido nerudo, ipapo, Mwari aripowo […]’ (where there is a will and love, there, God is also present).  

The above quote shows that there was an acknowledgement of the role faith played and how such giving would ensure the presence of God in the giver’s life. In his research amongst the Congolese Kimbanguist migrants in the UK and the US, Garbin (2019, 2) similarly notes that ‘respondents took a lot of pride in emphasising how their large collective donations reflected a spirit of solidarity and how their ‘sacred remittances’ contributed to the ‘development’ of both the church and the homeland’. In 2011, the chaplaincy increased the size of the shipping containers they were using from 20 feet to 40 feet as they were collecting more goods and money. This growing scale of giving culminated in the creation of a charity committee on 1 June 2013, which worked to galvanise the whole community in England and Wales and not just London. The committee then became the driving engine of the charitable efforts, meeting regularly and updating the congregation through its newsletter as well as announcements after mass. The committee was answerable to the congregation, as it was handling goods and money on their behalf. It also became a point of contact for those in Zimbabwe who had requests for support. The newly formed charity committee, which included members drawn from the London chaplaincy, conducted a questionnaire survey of the Zimbabwean Catholic community to find out what members preferred, which revealed that in addition to sending goods to Zimbabwe, congregants also wanted to help support other initiatives like assisting orphans in need of school fees. It was a form of a needs assessment based on the fact that the committee knew congregants were in constant contact with the homeland and might have heard some pleas or calls for help. Mr Fashamu argued:

We introduced that as the second primary pillar of the charity committee, sponsoring school children. We worked with dioceses in Zimbabwe, with the sisters, brothers there and they helped us identify children who were in need. We paired them with people here to sponsor those children. Parishioners were happy that as long as they were employed here in the UK, they would keep on looking after these children until they get even to university as part of their contributions to our communities back home.  

This quote shows that diasporic congregants indeed saw their relative economic privilege as a reason to help out those back home. They felt they were in a better position compared to Zimbabwe-based church members and therefore should give; their church membership had arguably reinforced this sense of privilege.

In addition, the charity committee also worked with members of its transnational religious network, diocesan and personal connections. In Zimbabwe, they received official support from ZCBC, particularly its Secretary General who helped coordinate the storage and distribution of goods on arrival. There were also other contacts of members of the chaplaincy in Zimbabwe who helped facilitate this process. Furthermore, the charity committee used returnee members of the Catholic community who had lived in the UK but were now based in Zimbabwe. In some cases, they also coordinated with the different beneficiaries prior to arrival of the shipment to alert them that they would need to go collect the goods. Mai Makura, whom I eventually interviewed in Harare, stated:

I was brought into this initiative because I was a member of the congregation in London before I retired and moved back to Zimbabwe. When I was there [the UK], I also took part in collecting donations to be sent to Zimbabwe and this time around, I am now on the other side.  

12

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14
The above quote shows that there is an element of trust and a reliance on mainly religious networks. As we shall below, ZimCatholics preferred to work with religious partners who were mainly Catholic in coordinating the disbursement of donations on the ground.

At the height of the project, the containers would be shipped to Zimbabwe with goods that included duvets, bicycles, desks, books, computers, blankets, furniture and goods for the disabled, for example at Jairos Jiri Association (a non-governmental organisation focusing on people living with disabilities, and one of the few non-Catholic beneficiaries). Some of these goods were earmarked for specific destinations, whilst others were just goods and money that congregants wanted to donate. Goods were mostly distributed to Catholic beneficiaries who were identified through the transnational networks and from requests from Zimbabwe, but the list of beneficiaries was not necessarily limited to this. However, their desire to help those in the homeland was to a certain extent also driven by their need to maintain a stake in the homeland so as to preserve the connections they have with home.

In 2014, when the Tokwe-Mukosi dam in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, burst after torrential rainfall hit the region, the chaplaincy decided to offer their support to some of the 1500 people who were displaced and were living in transit camps in Chingwizi, Chisase and Masangula downstream from the dam. The chaplaincy got news of the extent of damage from a video that was posted by Sister Mhizha, a Catholic nun who worked for a Catholic media production company in Zimbabwe. The video also included interviews with some of the victims about life in the transit camps. The charity committee then contacted Sister Mhizha to find out how they could help, asking her to be their contact person in Zimbabwe. The committee made an appeal via their centre in London for donations. The dam disaster was controversial in the way it was represented by the media in Zimbabwe, which emphasised the lack of state response to relieve citizens, and the partisan distribution of what little state assistance there was.

Zimbabwean Catholics in the UK sent about £10,000 to Sister Mhizha, which was used to purchase materials for schools in the transit camps. She explained the crisis in education that the donation helped to alleviate:

There was no structure at all […] at some point they had put up building poles, we met with the parents, the teachers and we asked them what they wanted and they told us that they needed textbooks to begin with and exercise books to enable the pupils to start learning. We had four schools, one secondary school and three primary schools. They had nothing at this point. The one thing that they had was the district or province had realised that there were four schools that had been started so they somehow provided a teacher or two for each school, qualified teacher. The rest were just volunteers from the community.

The above shows the extent of damage that the dam had caused and the desperate situation of those in the transit camps. This sort of disaster relief stimulated UK-based Zimbabwean Catholics to come together quickly and send money to be used for assistance in the camps. It was also an opportunity for them to use their spiritual and financial capital to engage with the homeland quite swiftly. The funds were used to buy various school supplies such as chalkboards, books, pens and wooden clipboards. Specifically, for the secondary school where some of the students were to sit for their ordinary level exams in the same year, the funds were used to help them pay registration and examination fees at a nearby secondary school that has examination facilities.
These donations were important and added to the development of students in the camps who otherwise would not have gone to school or would have lacked critical resources such as books. Interestingly, though the beneficiaries were not exclusively Catholic, the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe was seen as a trusted and responsible institution – the London-based committee chose to work with Sister Mhizha, a Catholic nun, instead of local authorities in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe has suffered from cases of politicisation of relief aid in the past, and specifically in these camps in Masvingo, as government took over distribution of aid from various non-governmental organisations, which they handed out along partisan lines (‘Politicisation of Food Aid Hits Chingwizi Holding Camp – Zimbabwe’ 201417). Remarkably, in this instance, the UK-based Zimbabwean Catholics did not even use other conventional international Catholic development agencies like Catholic Relief Services or Caritas that do have operations in Zimbabwe, again showing how informal this charity was and how it was meant for specific people, including certain intermediaries.

To demonstrate the UK-based Zimbabwean Catholics’ self-interest and their need to invest in their own spirituality, while still giving to the homeland, during the period of research, the charity committee had just completed a project at Chishawasha Seminary, the main Catholic seminary in Zimbabwe, installing fibre-optic cable for broadband that cost US$17,000. The rector of the seminary explained:

[...I got a call from the Secretary General [of ZCBC] saying I have received here some cash from the UK, $6500 and we were already contemplating paying the money ourselves [...] these guys did not even ask for an application or anything, they sent cash, which was already difficult to get. We went to Telone, paid and we got them to start the work and by June, the work was finished, and connection was made.18

The UK-based Zimbabwean Catholics sent funds to cover the seminary’s bill and paid it off in full. The rector added that ‘this entire connection project was something undertaken fully by Zimbabweans in the UK. They had already sent us second-hand computers, TVs, blankets, duvets, etc. in addition to this money and we are very grateful’. By giving connectivity to the seminary, the diaspora-based Catholics had enabled students there to easily access information and emails for both seminarians and lecturers. It also meant that the rector and his administration did not need to rush into town whenever they needed to send an email or download information, saving on fuel and transportation costs. Here, they were investing directly in the education of priests who might potentially be sent to the UK to minister to them; this was indeed charity, but did not necessarily follow agendas of poverty alleviation inter alia. This also shows not only how much support the UK-based Zimbabwean Catholics were giving to the homeland, sending both goods and money to support communities and individuals, but also the strong ties they shared with Zimbabwe as the homeland with which their loyalties lie.

‘Where there is will, there is a way’: maintaining stakes in the homeland through small church-based giving projects

The strength of a homeland sense of belonging created by congregants through faith-based giving, religious transnationalism and the importance of this giving in the development of
the homeland more specifically is further seen through smaller projects that were happening following the disbandment of the charity committee in 2014. The charity committee was disbanded by the chaplain citing delays with the delivery of the containers. The last container shipped was delayed at the border and held for more than a year as Zimbabwe’s Revenue Authority demanded customs duty. It then started accumulating storage fees, and the longer it took the higher the fees became – fees that were meant to be borne by the congregants. Disillusionment with the container initiative also began when it turned out that a number of items that had been sent went missing whilst in storage. The new chaplain, who was afraid of the chaplaincy getting a bad name if criticism got out of hand amongst Zimbabweans in the UK, insisted that all money and efforts be redirected via the Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster, into the general donation pool.

This resulted in congregants forming smaller groups which they used to give directly to communities and parishes in Zimbabwe. These groups showed members’ sense of primary obligation to Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans, and their lack of desire to give to others in the UK or to other global projects that the Catholic Church was supporting. Additionally, it showed the reliance again on the structures of the Catholic institution which are connected with spirituality and trust. There was now a tension between helping the church more broadly with its project and helping the less fortunate in Zimbabwe directly. Most congregants argued that once their financial contributions were redirected via Westminster, there was no guarantee that they would be received by the Zimbabwean communities they sought to assist and could instead be redirected anywhere in the world. As one of the members of the group said:

At the end of the day, it is nice to know that you are doing something for specific people. In some cases, these are also parishes that we were members of before we left Zimbabwe and we’d know what problems are there. Sending it [donations] via the Archdiocese may mean it goes elsewhere … I wouldn’t know where.

The above sentiments can stem from the direct and strong transnational connections that the congregation had with the homeland. I contend here that members of these groups were also trying to find other ways to maintain a stake in the homeland so as to preserve the connections they have with home, considering the charity committee through which they had access to the homeland was disbanded, and the scale of giving had not necessarily decreased. This is evidenced by the choice of some projects which they undertook – which could be classified as charity, yes, but not necessarily development, as I shall discuss further below.

Moreover, these smaller groups claimed to not necessarily be using the official channels at church, which is evidence of self-interest. Church members showed ambivalence towards the new directive instituted by the chaplain to donate via the Diocese of Westminster. They formed networks of individuals who knew each other through church and gave to specific individuals and projects in the homeland that they knew personally. One such group I interacted with was a WhatsApp-based group/forum. The group was coordinated by a church member, who explained that any member of the group was free to message with requests. Mrs Moyo, the coordinator of the group, explained:

whenever I hear of a need, I tend to form a WhatsApp forum/group with people from the area where the need is and I get a hold of someone who comes from the mission station or area that
we are focussing on and they give us names of people they know from home, their numbers, and together we form a group of people here in the diaspora and those at home, I spell out what the need is, what I have heard and we come out very open, and we say if you come on this forum, we will ask you to contribute, if you contribute we are going to ask you to tell the whole group how much you have contributed for the sake of transparency.22

This quote details how the group operated: after contact from representatives in Zimbabwe, UK-based group members put together what was required, each declaring in the group how much they were contributing and then it was sent to Zimbabwe. When further probed who exactly is in the group and whether it included diverse members of the congregation, Mrs Moyo responded by saying: ‘It is easy to add people onto the platform because I either usually have their numbers or we know each other at church […] we also all add each other as we are all friends’.23

It is clear from the above that this group relied on trusted religious networks and friends from church who, I argue, would be easy to work with as they were familiar with each other. Mrs Moyo would then find another contact in Zimbabwe to exchange the money into whatever currency was being used at that moment before contacting the person in charge of the project they were trying to assist. This provides another example of how religious transnationalism facilitates migrants' engagement with the homeland via religious intermediaries at home. It also shows a constant desire on the part of UK-based Zimbabwean Catholics to help out in the homeland.

Notwithstanding the fact that they were a small group, this WhatsApp-based group managed to donate – albeit in some cases, to Catholic-related initiatives – through a number of projects that I will briefly discuss. They helped refurbish the sacrist at a mission just outside the capital city of Zimbabwe, put in floor tiles in the main church and also bought trunks for the priests to store their robes and other belongings in when leading services in smaller local centres away from the main mission.24 The group argued that spiritual development is good for Zimbabwe as it is part of the moral fabric of the country. At the same mission, they installed solar geysers and water tanks for the nun’s convent, which had struggled with water shortages. Furthermore, they bought one pair of school shoes each for the 76 children resident at the mission’s orphanage and helped them pay their school fees too. One of the group members recalled how pledges were made following a request she had made via the WhatsApp group:

I contacted the [WhatsApp] group and told them that Sister Mary had 76 orphans, they need school fees, shoes, uniforms, books, etc., so what we did was that we let the people in the group know that school shoes are $15 a pair so people were pledging the money until we had 76 pairs. Then we said ‘uniform’ and people pledged.25

Most of these efforts were in direct response to a need, particularly within the Catholic circles, and were through consultations with church representative on the ground, which is why in some instances, they seem to not conform with conventional understandings of development. However, to the members of this particular group, this charity work or giving did indeed benefit the communities in developmental ways by freeing up money in the pockets of their beneficiaries as they didn’t have to necessarily contribute to the construction of their church buildings or by providing services to priests themselves. This then meant they had extra money to spend on family and other necessary expenses.
Conclusion

This article has shown the complex interactions between religion (and religious practice) and development (Bompani 2014) by exploring how religious networks influence charitable giving by religious migrants, leading to significant community development projects within the homeland. I argued that religious transnationalism amongst diaspora members shapes engagements with the homeland through charitable giving. The paper contributes to literature on religion and development by bringing in a dimension that has been not forefronted by prior work, in the form of actions of ordinary people in the face of global disparities of the modern world and how these contribute to development. It also shows how religious networks help migrants circumvent the hegemony of national governments and international development aid actors (Haustein and Tomalin 2021), and how these actions sit in between individual remittances and formalised charities. The congregants I studied found themselves in direct contact with the homeland as they took directives from the mother church in Zimbabwe which led them to mobilise resources available within their communities, evidencing a form of localised or amateur aid (Roepstorff 2020; Schnable 2021). These forms of charitable giving contribute to development from below (Adogame 2016), which can also work to alleviate poverty and offer relief action, ultimately supporting human development.

At the same time, giving to projects linked to the homeland church can also be about self-interest and maintaining a stake in the homeland so as to sustain connections and not for altruistic purposes, as it can be about individual or group interests. There is a tension between helping out in relation to charitable agendas, informed by religious doctrines, and a need to gain spiritual favours and broadband with the mother church as well as other Catholic church communities in the homeland. Additionally, these informalised forms of charity can also sometimes suffer the same consequences as top-down approaches to aid if no needs assessments are conducted with beneficiaries. Notwithstanding, the continued growth of Zimbabwean fellowships, and the scale of funds channelled through church groups and institutions to disaster relief and a wide range of other projects, demonstrates the on-going importance of the church and religious transnationalism as a feature of the Zimbabwean diaspora and its impacts on the homeland. The scale of giving by Zimbabwean-based Catholics was notable, and the projects facilitated by the charity committee and church-based groups were visible on the ground in Zimbabwe. Prior studies have not looked at these charitable initiatives with their tangible impacts on the ground.

The analysis of charitable giving in this article is thus an extension of prior work on transnational Zimbabwean Catholic fellowships. In addition, this article contributes to the scant literature on African diaspora population’s faith communities and their engagement in development through transnational contributions to homelands that have not previously been forefronted. All in all, this article contributes to the growing literature on seeking to demystify normative suppositions of development’s secularism (Clarke and Jennings 2008; Deneulin 2013; Ademolu 2020).

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Notes

1. For security reasons, I deliberately do not disclose the exact location where the congregation met in London.
2. For the remainder of the paper, I will interchangeably use ‘the centre’ or ‘the chaplaincy’ to refer to this particular Zimbabwean congregation that prayed together in London.
3. Interview with Mr Mamombe, London, 18 November 2017.
4. Interview with Mrs Moyo, London, 25 November 2017.
5. One of the main vernacular languages spoken in most parts of Zimbabwe.
6. One of the main vernacular languages spoken in specific provinces in Zimbabwe.
7. Interview with Mr Fashamu, London, 13 November 2017.
8. Interview with Mr Chishamba, London, 21 October 2017.
9. Interview with Mr Fashamu. London, 13 November 2017.
10. Ibid.
11. Interview with Mrs Moyo, London, 25 November 2017.
12. Interview with Trust, London, 2 December 2017.
13. Interview with Mr Fashamu, London, 13 November 2017.
14. Interview with Mai Makura, Harare, 28 February 2018.
15. Interview with Sister Mhizha, Harare, 7 February 2018.
16. Ibid.
17. Also see https://reliefweb.int/report/zimbabwe/politicisation-food-aid-hits-chingwizi-holding-camp
18. Interview with Father Mhosva, Harare, 15 May 2018.
19. Ibid.
20. This is despite the fact that donations can enter the country duty free. See https://www.zimra.co.zw/profile/2018-rebate-of-duty-on-goods-donated-to-associations-and-organisations-in-zimbabwe-involved-in-charitable-or-welfare-work
21. Interview with Shelly, London, 16 October 2017.
22. Interview with Mrs Moyo, London, 25 November 2017.
23. Ibid.
24. Interview with Mai Makura, Harare, 28 February 2018.
25. Ibid.

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