

## **The problem of social justice in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* of 1995 and in the documents of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference in the years 2014–2024**

Problem sprawiedliwości społecznej w posynodalnej adhortacji apostolskiej *Ecclesia in Africa* z 1995 roku oraz w dokumentach Konferencji Katolickich Biskupów Ghany w latach 2014–2024

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**Abstract:** In an era marked by profound social inequalities and ethical dilemmas, the role of religious institutions in advocating for social justice has never been more critical. This article explores the response of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCBC) to the social justice imperatives outlined in *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), a post-synodal apostolic exhortation by Pope John Paul II. A descriptive and critical analysis will be conducted based on selected pastoral letters and other statements from the GCBC. This analysis will address pressing social issues, including economic inequality, conflicts, inequality in access to quality education, political corruption, and environmental degradation, challenges that continue to impact Ghanaian society. An analysis of the documents and teachings of the GCBC on social justice reveals the Conference's stance on issues pertinent to the Ghanaian context. This research enhances understanding of the GCBC's role in promoting social justice in Ghana and its implications for policy and practice.

**Keywords:** *Ecclesia in Africa*; Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference; Social Justice; Catholic Church; Ghana

**Abstrakt:** W epoce naznaczonej głębokimi nierównościami społecznymi i dylematami etycznymi rola instytucji religijnych w promowaniu sprawiedliwości społecznej nigdy nie była tak istotna. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje reakcję Konferencji Katolickich Biskupów Ghany (KKBG) na imperatywy sprawiedliwości społecznej przedstawione w *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), posynodalnej Adhortacji apostolskiej papieża Jana Pawła II. Przeprowadzona zostanie przegląd opisowa i krytyczna oparta na wybranych listach pasterskich i innych oświadczeniach KKBG. Przegląd ta będzie dotyczyła palących problemów społecznych, w tym nierówności ekonomicznych, konfliktów, nierówności w dostępie do wysokiej jakości edukacji, korupcji politycznej i degradacji środowiska naturalnego, czyli wyzwań, które nadal mają wpływ na społeczeństwo Ghany. Przegląd dokumentów i nauk KKBG dotyczących sprawiedliwości społecznej ujawnia stanowisko Konferencji w kwestiach istotnych dla kontekstu ghańskiego. Badania te pozwalają lepiej zrozumieć rolę KKBG w promowaniu sprawiedliwości społecznej w Ghanie oraz jej implikacje dla polityki i praktyki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Ecclesia in Africa*; Konferencja Katolickich Biskupów Ghany; sprawiedliwość społeczna; Kościół katolicki; Ghana

## Introduction

The Church's commitment to social justice advocacy has always been an important aspect of its mission, particularly in Africa, where economic inequalities, systemic corruption, and ethnic conflicts are obstacles to establishing equitable and just societies. The inquiry focuses on the social justice imperatives outlined in *Ecclesia in Africa* and in the documents of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCBC) during the years 2014–2024. Through its teachings, the GCBC is committed to addressing these pressing challenges, thereby aligning with the social justice principles delineated in *Ecclesia in Africa*. The bishops' advocacy for social justice is deeply rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ. It underscores the essence of loving one's neighbour and fostering peace within the community. However, Ghanaian society continues to battle with economic inequality, corruption, ethnic conflicts, and environmental degradation. The Church's social justice teaching and its impact on the broader societal landscape in Ghana are questioned. There is a need for a thorough analysis of the implementation and outcomes of these teachings as the GCBC navigates its role in fostering social transformation amidst ongoing challenges.

The post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, meaning the Church in Africa, was issued by Pope John Paul II in 1995. It resulted from several years of reflection by the Catholic Church in Africa, culminating in a significant assembly of bishops from the continent convened in Rome in April and May 1994. This gathering was called the 'Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops'. Historically, it was a moment of grace which reviewed the Catholic Church in Africa 30 years after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Its

main purpose was to assess how the Catholic Church was progressing as a true Koinonia, or a Family of God, in its evangelisation mission in preparation for the year 2000. Key to the synod were the challenges, opportunities, and future of evangelisation and development in Africa (Clement and John 2020, 1). *Ecclesia in Africa* provides a framework for the Church's active participation in social justice issues in Africa. For instance, it highlights the Church's mission to develop ecumenical dialogue with people of other Christian denominations to realise the unity for which Christ prayed. Together with these Christian denominations, the Catholic Church in Africa is called to promote human dignity, justice, peace, and reconciliation as the core of its evangelising efforts (John Paul II 1995, 65). It emphasises the importance of the Church in promoting social justice in the face of gross violations of human dignity and rights (John Paul II 1995, 106).

The GCBC, in alignment with its teachings, has released numerous pastoral letters and other statements that highlight its commitment to social justice. The analysis will be made based on the conference's: Pastoral Guidelines (2014), Press Launch for a Two-Day Pro-Life Conference in Ghana (2015), the Key-Note Address by Bishop Adanuty at the maiden pro-life conference in Accra (2015), Pastoral Letter on Politics for Nation-Building and Social Cohesion (2020), Pastoral Letter for Christmas (2021) and New Year (2022), Advent Pastoral Letter (2023), Statement on Bawku Conflict (2023), and Lenten Pastoral Letter (2024). These documents embody the theological and ethical foundations of the Church's teachings, firmly grounded in the Gospel message of love and peace as exemplified by Jesus Christ.

A careful examination of the GCBC's recent pastoral letters reveals a consistent emphasis on the issues relating to social justice. The conference has often addressed a whole range of issues like corruption, poverty, conflict, and the marginalisation of the vulnerable. The teachings of the conference advocate for structural reforms that promote the equitable distribution of scarce resources, peace, transparent governance, and the protection of human rights. The GCBC's pastoral letters often draw on biblical texts and Church doctrine to support their advocacy, providing a moral framework for addressing social injustices.

Notwithstanding the clear directives and moral imperatives outlined in *Ecclesia in Africa*, the practical application of these principles in Ghana by the bishops and the faithful remains fraught with challenges. Ghana's socio-political landscape is characterised by systemic corruption, economic disparities, and ethnic tensions that hinder the effective implementation of social justice initiatives. The GCBC has acknowledged these obstacles, often highlighting the gap between the Church's teachings and the lived realities of the Ghanaian people. Furthermore, corruption, poverty, gender inequality, inequality in access to quality education, and land degradation further complicate efforts to translate Church teachings into actionable policies and programmes in Ghana.

Ghana is recognised as one of Africa's most enchanting countries to explore, characterised by its stunning landscapes and diverse religious groups (Church Growth Movement 2023). The presence of Christianity in Ghana dates back to the 15th century, initiated by the efforts of Presbyterian and Methodist missionaries. This was followed by the arrival of Catholic and Anglican missionaries, which laid a foundation for the robust Christian community in Ghana (Adam 2024). Currently, the religious landscape of Ghana is primarily composed of Christianity (71.3% of the total population), Islam (19.9%), and Traditional religions (3.2%) (Dwell Ghana 2019 and Ghana Statistical Service 2021). Although other religious practices exist, these three faiths significantly influence various aspects of Ghanaian life, including spiritual, political, educational, economic, and family dimensions. Within the Christian context exists a hierarchy of denominations, with the Catholic Church accounting for 10% of the Christian population, the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches account for 31.6%, and the historic Protestant denominations, such as Presbyterian, Methodist and Anglican Churches, comprise 17.4% (Ghana Statistical Service 2021). Notably, Islam plays a vital role in the northern part of Ghana, where it predominantly shapes the cultural and social landscape.

Over the recent decades, the dynamics within Christianity in Ghana have undergone significant transformation. There has been a notable increase in the number of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, representing the largest segment of the Christian population, with a membership of approximately 3,864,355, representing 11.3% of Ghana's population (Tsekpoe, Christian, and Emmanuel 2025). These Churches mainly emphasize themes such as healing and miracles, prophecy, and prosperity, which resonate with younger generations and contribute to the evolving religious culture in Ghana (Diboro and Ehiem 2020, 79–91).

In the light of these developments, the Catholic Church has faced new challenges, witnessing a decline in its membership. According to the 2021 population and housing census, the percentage of Catholics dropped from 15.1% to 10.0% in 2021. This indicates a 5.1% decrease (Isenjia 2024a). Despite the decline, the Catholic Church continues to play a pivotal role in promoting the physical well-being of the Ghanaian populace by establishing hospitals, schools, and social amenities for the good of all (Francis Adoboli 2022).

## **I. The Concept of Social Justice**

### ***Theological Foundations of Social Justice***

The concept of social justice is fundamentally rooted in the Sacred Scriptures, where God's expectation for justice, mercy, and care for the vulnerable is vividly

uttered. The Prophet Isaiah encapsulates this divine calling, urging that “Learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan’s plea, defend the widow” (Is. 1:17 AB). This exhortation urges believers to actively and consciously engage in addressing societal injustices and advocate for the marginalised in society. In the New Testament, Jesus’ teachings reinforce this imperative, stressing the importance of caring for the marginalised, promising reward for those who act justly while warning of consequences for neglect (cf. Matt. 25:31–46).

Papal teachings have shaped the landscape of Catholic social thought, forming the foundation for integrating social justice into the mission of evangelisation. For instance, Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) laid the foundation for Catholic social teachings during the period of the Industrial Revolution. The document affirms the dignity of labour, acknowledges the rights of workers to fair wages, and defends the right to private property. The document further advocates solidarity between employers and employees, directly addressing the plight of workers.

Subsequent Papal documents have built upon these foundational teachings. *Centesimus Annus* (1991) by Pope John Paul II advocates for systems that prioritise the welfare of the human person over mere profit-making, thereby echoing the Church’s commitment to promoting social justice. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), expands this dialogue to involve integral human development, stressing ethical governance, sustainable development, and the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental concerns.

In the most recent time, Pope Francis advanced these themes through his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). The document advocates the preferential option for the poor, promoting policies that prioritise the marginalised and vulnerable. In *Laudato Si* (2015), Pope Francis calls for a collective responsibility towards our common home (our environment), recognising that ecological problems affect those who are disadvantaged in society. This approach not only promotes care for the environment but also reinforces the moral imperative to stand in solidarity with the vulnerable.

### ***Ecclesia in Africa***

Social justice is a central concept in Catholic doctrine as far as its social vision is concerned, revolving around principles that promote justice, peace, human dignity, and reconciliation (John Paul II 1995, 65). “Society ensures social justice when it provides the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain their due, according to their nature and vocation. Social justice is linked to the common good and the exercise of authority” (Catechism of the Catholic

Church 1992, 1928). The document *Ecclesia in Africa* promotes social justice while addressing many different social issues across the African continent.

The fundamental message of Sacred Scripture proclaims that “God created mankind in His image; in the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them” (cf. Gen. 1:27). The psalmist teaches that the human person is a creature of God. God then places the human creature at the centre and summit of the created order (cf. Ps. 8:4–7). Man is formed from the earth, and God blows into his nostrils the breath of life (cf. Gen. 2:7). Being in the image of God, the human individual inherits the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone.

Furthermore, “In creating the human race ‘male and female’, God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity, endowing them with inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to the human person” (John Paul II 1995, 82). This outlook affirms that men and women possess equal dignity and unchallengeable rights and responsibilities. Following this, certain African customs and practices that undermine women’s rights and the respect they deserve are frowned upon and discouraged. Encouraging efforts directed towards the protection of these rights, particularly in Africa. This understanding goes beyond mere theological position; it encompasses a foundational principle that upholds and esteems the sanctity of human life in all its forms (John Paul II 1995, 121). This extraordinary dignity calls on people not to live in sub-human social, economic, cultural, and political conditions. This passage forms the theological foundation that underpins the defence of personal dignity, justice, and social peace. It emphasises the promotion, liberation, and integral human development of all people and every individual. The document adds, “It is also for this reason that the development of peoples – within each nation and among nations – must be achieved in solidarity” (John Paul II 1995, 69).

*Ecclesia in Africa* advocates collectivity in pursuing sustainable development within individual nations and across borders. This approach promotes a sense of community, recognition of our shared humanity and empowers all people to reach their full potential. John Paul II urges the Church in Africa to recognise the intrinsic interdependence among individuals and nations. He calls for a proactive engagement with this reality by practising the virtue of solidarity. The development of the human person, particularly those who are underprivileged and marginalised in the community, lies at the core of the effort of evangelisation. This outlook is situated within the broader framework of promoting the common and harmonious development of all the members of a nation and all the peoples globally. The document states, “The fruit of solidarity is peace, an inestimable good for peoples and nations in every part of the world. For it is precisely by means of fostering and strengthening solidarity that the Church

can make a specific and decisive contribution to a true culture of peace" (John Paul 1995, 138). Furthermore, this notion underscores that "integral development implies respect for human dignity and this can only be achieved in justice and peace" (John Paul II 1995, 69).

Peace is an essential aspect of social justice, as strongly advocated by the document. John Paul II tasked all African bishops with establishing justice and peace commissions at all levels (John Paul II 1995, 106). The Church in Africa is called to participate fully in building a just and peaceful society using all available means (John Paul II 1995, 107). It is expedient to highlight the "Church's apostolate in the areas of education, health care, social awareness and in other programmes of assistance" (John Paul II 1995, 107). To the extent that these tasks help alleviate illiteracy, enhance public health, and stimulate greater participation in addressing societal problems with the spirit of freedom and co-responsibility, the Church fosters the conditions needed for the advancement of justice and peace (John Paul II 1995, 107).

Nevertheless, the Church in Africa is conscious of its responsibility to become, for all, a genuine place of true reconciliation through the witness borne by its citizens. These individuals, having been forgiven and mutually reconciled, will be empowered to extend the forgiveness and reconciliation that Christ our peace offers to humanity through His Church (John Paul II 1995, 79). According to Pope Benedict XVI, "if the spirit of reconciliation is absent in people's hearts, commitment to justice and peace lacks a more profound premise" (Otu 2020, 151). Reconciliation, therefore, is a necessary tool for peace. The imperative of reconciliation as a pathway to peace and unity in Africa, and addressing the divisions caused by various conflicts, remains vital in the document.

The document advocates for the common good as a guiding principle for every action. Advocating for the common good necessitates the active engagement of the Church in addressing social and economic challenges in Africa. The Church is called to promote policies that foster justice, enhance peace, improve the welfare of all individuals, and ensure a more equitable and compassionate community. The document further highlights the responsibility of governments, particularly in Africa, to establish policies that improve the economy and investment within their various countries on the continent, thereby creating more jobs alongside the existing ones. There is a pressing need for a commitment to pursue sound policies, distribute limited national resources to meet people's basic needs, and ensure a just and equitable distribution of resources and responsibilities. "In particular, governments have a binding duty to protect the common patrimony against waste and embezzlement by citizens lacking public spirit or by unscrupulous foreigners" (John Paul II 1995, 113).

### **The teachings of the GCBC**

The GCBC acknowledges that its apostolic mandate comes with a significant responsibility. They are tasked with reaffirming the Church's profound and beautiful teachings (GCBC 2015a), particularly the Church's teachings on social justice as outlined in *Ecclesia in Africa*. The Conference has advocated for various social justice principles within its teachings, emphasising themes such as human dignity, justice and peace, and reconciliation in its recent documents. These teachings reaffirm the GCBC's commitment to promoting equity and the inherent worth of individuals, alongside the importance of fostering social harmony and reconciling societal divisions.

In many of its documents, the conference continues to emphasise that each individual is created in the image and likeness of God, which grants the individual an inherent dignity and worth. This dignity must be respected and safeguarded at all times (GCBC 2015b). The Ghanaian Bishops further stress the intrinsic value of human life, asserting that each individual is a unique asset to creation and is the centre of creation. Moreover, the most critical and valuable resource of every nation is its 'human capital'. This explains why the loss of a person on the roads brings profound grief to families and society (GCBC 2021–2022c, 2). Furthermore, "As Christians, we believe that every human being is born in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26–28) and called to share in the life of the Creator – God. This supernatural vocation of man shows that life is sacred and inviolable. Human life is truly of a great and inestimable value" (GCBC 2015b). Upholding the dignity of the human person fosters peace in society, because "there can be no peace anywhere in the world if the dignity of the human person is disrespected and or violated" (GCBC 2021–2022c, 2).

This perspective is closely linked to social justice, which demands equitable treatment for every individual. It further seeks to remove all obstacles that impede the rights and opportunities of underprivileged groups. The Bishops appeal urgently, "we exhort all to strive to be committed to ...almsgiving as well as the practice of corporal and spiritual works of mercy proposed by the Church, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, bearing wrongs patiently, comforting the sorrowful and admonishing sinners during this season of grace" (Atemanke 2023). This urgent appeal expresses the Bishops' concern for the dignity of the human person.

The GCBC highlights the preferential option for the poor as a pivotal tenet of its doctrine. This principle is deeply rooted in the Gospels, with Jesus Christ serving as the model of this commitment. Compassion and solidarity are to be shown to the most vulnerable populations, including the impoverished,

marginalised, and underprivileged. This includes individuals such as prisoners, street children, persons with mental disabilities, widows, orphans, and others facing analogous circumstances. Such a paradigm not only reflects a moral obligation but also a call to foster a more equitable and just society (GCBC 2025d).

Furthermore, the GCBC advocates for social justice that emphasises peace-building within Ghana's socio-political landscape. The conference's invitation to Ghanaians to engage in constructive dialogue and resist divisive political tendencies reflects an understanding that social justice goes beyond mere advocacy. It requires active participation and a commitment to collective responsibility, which ensures that politics favours reconciliation, mutual respect, and societal cohesion (GCBC 2020e).

Sharing the teaching of Pope Francis, the GCBC said, "We share with Pope Francis the view that peace in society cannot be understood as pacification or the mere absence of violence resulting from the domination of one part of society over others. Nor does true peace act as a pretext for justifying a social structure which silences or appeases the poor, so that the more affluent can placidly support their lifestyle, while others have to make do as they can. Demands involving the distribution of wealth, concern for the poor and human rights cannot be suppressed under the guise of creating a consensus on paper or a transient peace for a contented minority. The dignity of the human person and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges" (GCBC 2014f, 16). This emphasises the notion that true peace requires addressing systemic inequalities rather than masking them under the pretext of harmony. The establishment of the Directorate of Governance, Justice and Peace (DGJP), Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), and Centre for Human Development (CEHUD) by the GCBC serves as a framework for promoting justice and peace in Ghana.

Reiterating the primacy of peace, a reference is made from Isaiah's prophecy, who designates Christ as the "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6) stressing that "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb... and a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11:6). This serves as a moral framework for the conference's advocacy for peace, compelling the Bishops to condemn conflicts and to promote reconciliation (GCBC 2021–2022c, 1). GCBC emphasises the vital role of each individual and the government in the communal pursuit of peace and stability in Bawku, a town in the northern part of Ghana (GCBC 2023g). The Zimbabwean Bishops' Conference is noted to have said, "peace building and nation-building are never completed tasks. Every generation has to establish national cohesion and peace" (Iheanacho 2022). It is therefore necessary to cultivate a reconciliatory disposition, forgive one another, and pursue reconciliation through grace rather than pride. This approach emphasises the significance of humility in fostering unity within the community (GCBC 2024h, 2).

GCBC articulates the notion that “peace is not only about tranquillity among humans, but also the harmony that exists between humans and all non-human creatures of God, which equally have a right to the environment as a home” (GCBC 2021–2022c, 4). For a long time, Ghana has faced significant environmental degradation and an ecological crisis, for instance, illegal mining. According to the GCBC, the reckless exploitation of the country’s natural resources for economic gain has caused pollution and the degradation of land and water bodies. The Bishops urged Ghanaians to cultivate a mindset of care and be responsible stewards of the environment. A new ecological paradigm is essential for preserving the integrity of Ghana’s environment for both current and future generations (GCBC 2021–2022c, 4). One notable initiative by the GCBC is the *Laudato Si* five-year action programme. This programme emphasises environmental sustainability through tree planting and ecological education, aligning with Pope Francis’s invitation to care for our common home. This programme seeks to promote the culture of environmental stewardship, instilling a sense of responsibility towards the environment within the Ghanaian people (Mayaki 2021).

It is important to recognise that the letters and documents produced by the GCBC are intended to serve purposes beyond mere written texts. Therefore, pastors are encouraged to incorporate these documents into their homilies to foster dialogue within the congregation about significant social and spiritual issues. However, questions arise regarding whether these pastors are able to effectively read these letters in various parishes.

The GCBC’s letters often attract media attention, especially when addressing critical issues such as governance, corruption, or elections. For instance, the GCBC’s 2024 Advent pastoral letter, which advocates for peace, justice, and unity ahead of the general elections, received coverage from various media outlets, including CISA News Africa.

## **2. Challenges to Social Justice in Ghana and Africa at Large**

The quest for social justice faces substantial challenges in Ghana. The same can be said of other African countries and peoples, especially in the post-colonial era. These include corruption, poverty, disparities in educational access, gender inequalities, environmental degradation, divisions among ethnic groups, and Pentecostalisation and the development of the Prosperity Gospel.

Systemic corruption remains a challenging obstacle to the realisation of social justice. According to the Symposium of Episcopal Conference in Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), “Corruption has become a cancer in almost all the African countries and affects vital sectors such as the economic system,

day to day administration, the job market, health, education, and the judicial system" (SECAM 2013, 8). This phenomenon poses challenges across Africa, taking away public trust in institutions. *Ecclesia in Africa* points out corruption as a challenging obstacle to social justice and peace. Corruption within the local leadership has been the root cause of most grievous issues Africa faces. For instance, through the corrupt acts of officials, economic challenges are intensified. With their selfish interests, these officials divert national resources for personal gain and often transfer national funds to foreign bank accounts. Regardless of any legal justification, actions like this are classified as systemic theft, which impedes social justice progress in Africa (John Paul II 1995, 113). In Ghana, bribery and corruption are dual challenges to social justice. Present-day Ghana is marked by widespread and unconcealed corruption. Individuals across various levels of society are involved in overtly corrupt practices without fear of consequences. Unfortunately, even some Christians are involved in these corrupt practices (Pulse Ghana 2015). "The upsurge in social vices and corrupt practices in the country is a great source of worry to the Church" (Isenjia 2025b). The Republic of Congo, for instance, is equally marked by political corruption, which has negatively affected the country (MexicoHistorio.com 2025). Furthermore, in Nigeria, "corruption remains a significant obstacle to social justice ... permeating various levels of society and hindering equitable resource distribution" (NairaProject). Corruption leads to a lack of trust and equity, eventually obstructing sustainable development and social cohesion in African societies. Corruption leads to social exclusion, which involves neglecting the marginalised populations. These people often experience systemic inequalities impeding their involvement in various aspects of social life.

The abundance of natural resources in Africa is in high contrast with the high rate of poverty among a greater number of people in Africa (African Development Bank 2007). Africa is endowed with natural resources and rich environments, as well as productive land and valuable natural resources. Natural resources like minerals, oil, gas, coal, and forests are all found in Africa, yet Africa experiences a low level of economic growth and weaker development outcomes (African Development Bank 2007). Unfortunately, "Africa's natural resource wealth, which ought to be a blessing, is arguably a curse" (Aigbe 2014). Poverty is one of the disturbing issues in Africa. Situations in countries, for example, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Rwanda, and Sudan (Aigbe 2014) explain this phenomenon. This remains a challenge to social justice in various African nations, exacerbated mainly by economic instability and limited access to essential resources.

The youth are affected massively by the persistence of poverty, blocking them from reaching their goals as well as reaching their full potential for the benefit of society. In the state of diminished enthusiasm, dreams are shattered

and hopes are lost. The young are compelled to migrate in search of better opportunities elsewhere, experiencing life as economic refugees and sometimes navigating a precarious existence in a foreign context (John Paul II 1995, 115).

Access to quality education remains significantly inequitable, particularly in rural areas in Ghana, which often lag behind their urban counterparts. Students in cities and towns often benefit from better learning environments, while those in rural areas face considerable challenges. ‘Schools under trees’ is a term used to describe a situation where students in some parts of Ghana, due to a lack of access to adequate classrooms, are forced, with no option, to study outdoors, under trees. Furthermore, essential study materials like pens, pencils, appropriate uniforms, and backpacks frequently pose a challenge for some students whose parents are not able to afford to buy them. This disparity contributes to systemic inequalities in the education sector within Ghana, a situation that is mirrored in several other African countries. It is typical for urban schools to experience an excess of teachers while schools in other parts of the country face a significant teacher shortage. Educational inequalities in the country impede the practice of social justice. Normally, schools in rural areas have a lower enrolment rate, a higher dropout rate, and poor educational results as compared to schools from the urban areas (Isaac and Bridget 2024).

Furthermore, there is a “non-compliance by some politicians and government appointees with the partnership that exists between the government and the Catholic Church in the provision of education in the country” (Isenjia 2025). This poses a challenge to the promotion of quality education by the Church in partnership with the government of Ghana. It had been the wish of the Church to highlight religious, moral, ethical, and civic education that focuses on the training of responsible and productive citizens and not just knowledgeable and skilful citizens who will end up being social misfits (Isenjia 2025). Gender inequality has been another factor that has been an obstacle to social justice in Ghana. Some societies prioritise boy-child education over girl-child education. Normally, girls are deprived of educational and other privileges. Furthermore, “Gender inequalities are also a persistent issue in Ghana, particularly in rural areas where cultural norms and economic pressures disproportionately affect girls’ education. Many girls are forced to leave school early due to factors such as early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and the expectation that they contribute to household labour, further entrenching the cycle of poverty and inequality” (Isaac and Bridget 2024). In the family, it is believed that men are the heads of the family. As a result, the word of the man is taken as final, particularly in rural areas.

Environmental challenges have emerged as a significant concern in Ghana and other nations across the African continent, significantly impacting livelihoods and exacerbating existing social inequalities. The country faces

environmental issues such as the persistent pollution of water bodies, the littering of plastic waste all over the place, the careless felling of trees in forest reserves, and the widespread illegal mining (called galamsey) operations in towns and villages (Abbey-Quaye 2021).

Another challenge identified concerns the various forms of division that have contributed to ethnic conflicts in Africa that need to be healed through honest dialogue. Within the borders created by the colonial powers, the co-existence of ethnic groups with diverse traditions, languages, and religions often encounters challenges arising from serious mutual hostilities. These tribal disagreements challenge and endanger the existence of peace and the quest for the common good of the society. These hostilities create difficulties for the life of the Church and the acceptance of Pastors from other ethnic groups. “This is why the Church in Africa feels challenged by the specific responsibility of healing these divisions. For the same reason, the Special Assembly emphasised the importance of ecumenical dialogue with other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and of dialogue with African traditional religion and Islam” (John Paul II 1995, 19).

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Ghana have significantly reshaped the religious landscape. Pentecostal religiosity is characterised, among other things, by praying in tongues, miracles, exorcisms, and healings. Another characteristic of this movement is the proclamation of the Prosperity Gospel (Kobyliński 2021).

Prosperity gospel has been defined as the “Christian worldviews that emphasise an earthly life of health, wealth, and happiness as the divine, inalienable right of all who have faith in God and live in obedience to His commands” (Boaheng, Isaac, Clement Amoako and Samuel 2023, 1357).

The prosperity gospel is also referred to as prosperity theology, the word of faith, or the health and wealth gospel. Central to this belief system is the idea that God desires His followers to experience a prosperous and fulfilling life, one characterised by economic wealth, physical health, and happiness in personal, familial, and professional dimensions of life. Within this framework, the individuals’ temporal well-being becomes the focal point of their prayers and religious practices. This portrays the Creator as one who fulfils all the desires and aspirations of His followers (Kobyliński 2021). Prosperity gospel is often associated with a framework that emphasises deliverance from adversarial forces, such as Satan, and malevolent spirits. This perspective posits that these entities seek to impede believers from experiencing the benefits and blessings of God associated with salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ (Benyah 2018, 122).

Pentecostalism undoubtedly offers a vibrant religious experience that resonates with the spiritual needs of individuals in contemporary society. The prevalence of social and economic challenges in regions of Africa and South America, such as poverty and social injustice, has contributed significantly to

the expansion of these movements. Emerging Pentecostal movements provide their followers with a sense of importance and identity, which in turn, enhances their self-esteem and offers a feeling of stabilisation and settlement in often unrestrained environments (Kobyliński 2021).

However, this religious perspective promotes a form of social egoism. Rather than fostering a commitment to social justice, the prosperity gospel tends to neglect the needs of the poor and marginalised. It often intensifies social individualism, undermines solidarity, and encourages an attitude where religious faith is viewed as the sole means to achieving personal and societal well-being. This attitude ends up obstructing political or economic reforms that could promote social justice (Kobyliński 2021). In the Ghanaian and the broader African context, there exists a notable connection between the concept of success, often measured through visible displays of wealth and material possessions, and the idea of divine favour. This connection is significantly influenced by the prosperity gospel, which promotes the idea that financial success and well-being are direct results of one's faith and divine blessings. Additionally, this perspective is deeply rooted in the consumer-oriented values prevalent in religious practices, illustrating how religious beliefs can intersect with and reinforce consumerism. (Benyah 2018, 121).

Moreover, the prosperity gospel presents a flawed understanding of ethics concerning miracles and healing. The promise of a life devoid of pain and suffering is, in reality, misleading. Some preachers with this movement may employ techniques of mental manipulation to ensure the fulfilment of their goals (Kobyliński 2021). According to Benyah, the “emphasis on the prosperity gospel is to become more modern in outlook, sophisticated, and powerful as a symbolising feature of one's right standing with God in terms of payment of tithes and offerings” (Benyah 2018, 122). Certain neo-Pentecostal leaders engage in making inaccurate assessments regarding the health of the people who attend healing services. This diagnosis can be so persuasive that individuals with actual medical conditions might forgo necessary treatment, ultimately jeopardising their health and well-being (Kobyliński 2021). Prosperity gospel may be said to be a problem that hinders social justice in Ghana and Africa.

### **3. Promotion of Social Justice as Part of the Church's Task of Evangelisation**

The promotion of social justice is linked to the church's mission of evangelisation, which is deeply rooted in the gospel values of love, solidarity, and care for the less privileged. According to *Ecclesia in Africa*, “The Church as the Family of God in Africa must bear witness to Christ also by promoting justice...on

the Continent and throughout the world" (John Paul II 1995, 105). This can be done through education, fostering Christian attitudes and virtues, raising public awareness and assistance programmes, inclusive and supportive networks, fostering the nobility of marriage and the family, and advocating policy changes.

## **Education**

John Paul II asserts that "Public life on behalf of the person and society finds its continuous line of action in the defence and the promotion of justice, understood to be a virtue, an understanding which requires education" (John Paul II 1995, 42). The Church in Africa is thus invited to engage in the education of its members, aiming at the "formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end" and of the common good of the societies of which, as individuals, they are members, and in whose obligations, they will share as responsible adults (Vatican II 1965a, 90).

The Church's commitment to education on social justice can be implemented during public celebrations, workshops, retreats, and through radio and television programmes. Additionally, the document *Ecclesia in Africa* recommends that the training of the laity be conducted through "suitable centres and schools of biblical and pastoral formation" (John Paul II 1995, 90). As the Church engages in the formation of laypeople, they become well-informed about their rights and responsibilities, effective management of public goods, responsible political participation, and advocacy for the common good (John Paul II 1995, 107). *Gaudium et Spes* emphasises that secular responsibilities and activities are primarily, though not exclusively, the domain of the laypeople (Vatican II 1965b, 43).

Consequently, Christians occupying positions of responsibility must be carefully prepared for political, economic and social tasks through solid formation in the Church's social doctrine, ensuring that they serve as faithful witnesses to the Gospel in their workplaces (John Paul II 1995, 90).

Furthermore, the Church's influence in the field of education is manifested uniquely by the Catholic school (Vatican II 1965c, 8). Catholic education aims at the "integral formation of students as physical, intellectual, and spiritual beings called to perfect humanity in the fullness of Christ" (Cardinal Newman Society 2016, IV). Therefore, it is crucial to support children and young people by utilising the latest advancements in psychology, including effective teaching methods, to ensure the well-balanced growth of their physical, moral, and intellectual endowments. This will enable them to cultivate a mature sense of responsibility and empower them to navigate life's challenges with courage and constancy (Vatican II 1965c, 1). The Church must support the young

people to discover themselves and their potential, enabling them to “overcome the obstacles thwarting their development: illiteracy, idleness, hunger, drugs.” To overcome these challenges, young people should be encouraged to become agents of change among their peers (John Paul II 1995, 93).

### ***Fostering Christian attitudes and virtues***

Christian attitudes and virtues such as justice, compassion, and solidarity are central to the Church’s mission of evangelisation. Within the African context, the Church, as the family of God, is invited to “bear witness to Christ also by promoting justice and peace on the Continent and throughout the world” (John Paul II 1995, 105). The Church’s witness must be supported by a strong dedication to justice and solidarity from each member of the Church. This commitment is particularly crucial for lay faithful in public offices, as their witness requires an enduring spiritual attitude and a lifestyle that aligns with the Christian faith (John Paul II 1995, 105). Moreover, “In the pluralistic societies of our day, it is especially due to the commitment of Catholics in public life that the Church can exercise a positive influence.” Whether they serve as professionals or teachers, businessmen or civil servants, law enforcement officials, or politicians, Catholics are expected to embody goodness, truth, justice and love of God in their daily lives (John Paul II 1995, 108).

The Church in Africa is tasked to bring together the faithful and, through the works of the priests and catechists, strengthen their faith and assist them to fulfil their respective tasks (John Paul II 1995, 88). To foster these attitudes and virtues, the Church must engage in catechesis and faith formation programmes organised at the diocesan, deanery, parish, and societal levels for the lay people. Additionally, the Church should encourage ethical teachings and advocate for servant leadership among the clergy and laity.

### ***Raising public awareness and assistance programmes***

The Church, as an institution embedded within both the community and the nation, holds both the right and the responsibility to actively contribute to the construction of a just and peaceful society utilising all available resources (John Paul II 1995, 107).

In Africa, the Church has the responsibility to foster a just and peaceful society by addressing systemic injustices and promoting social justice. This is achieved through media engagement, where public attention is brought to relevant societal issues. Leveraging social media, the Church in Africa is tasked

with raising public awareness on critical topics like human rights advocacy, poverty alleviation, and environmental stewardship, thereby establishing a just society. The pastoral guidelines of the GCBC from 2014 stress the need for social communication as an instrument for promoting unity and peace (GCBC 2014f).

The Church's commitment to social justice extends to its initiatives in education, healthcare, and various assistance programmes. Through these efforts, the Church works, creating awareness that positively impacts the public. The apostolate of the Church should aim at reducing ignorance and improving public health to help solve societal problems. In this sense, the Church facilitates "conditions for the progress of justice and peace" (John Paul II 1995, 107).

### ***Inclusive and supportive networks***

The Church's commitment to promoting individual and communal development goes beyond individual responsibility; it constitutes a collective responsibility that necessitates coordinated action from all sectors of society.

The Church in Africa must collaborate with other faith-based organisations, government agencies, and non-governmental organisations to engage in initiatives that foster social justice. Such collaboration can enhance the effectiveness of social justice initiatives and ensure inclusiveness among relevant institutions. Therefore, an invitation for cooperative efforts is essential, particularly within the Christian community in Africa.

The document *Ecclesia in Africa* advocates for the Church to invite fellow Christians to engage in partnerships focused on the advancement of integral human development. As the Church in Africa accepts invitations from other denominations, it demonstrates the Church's readiness to partner on initiatives that further common goals. This partnership extends beyond intra-faith collaboration; the Church in Africa is encouraged to reach out to individuals of diverse religious backgrounds (John Paul II 1995, 109). Such inclusiveness is vital for the effectiveness of social justice initiatives and to promote a commitment to human dignity that goes beyond religious boundaries. Through collective efforts, peace, justice and equity can be achieved within the African societies.

### ***Fostering the nobility of marriage and family***

In the document *Ecclesia in Africa*, the Christian family is described as a true "domestic Church," which serves humanity (John Paul II 1995, 92). The family is an important institution in every society. The document *Gaudium et Spes* states that "The well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian

society is intimately linked with the healthy condition of that community produced by marriage and family" (Vatican Council II 1965b, 47).

This suggests that focusing on the development and maintenance of marriages and families significantly contributes to the promotion of the well-being of individuals and society. It is the responsibility of the Church in Africa to implement initiatives that support and develop the institution of marriage and the family, thereby fostering a society characterised by well-developed individuals.

It is important that the Christian family, through the initiative of the Church in Africa, be built on robust cultural pillars and the values embedded in the tradition of the African family, in order to serve as the foundation of the Christian witness in society (John Paul II 1995, 92).

### **Advocating policy change**

The document *Ecclesia in Africa* emphasises that "The Church must continue to play her prophetic role and be the voice of the voiceless, so that everywhere the human dignity of every individual will be acknowledged, and that people will always be at the centre of all government programmes" (John Paul II 1995, 106). This prophetic role can be effectively carried out through a rigorous commitment to justice and peace (John Paul II 1995, 106).

The Church accomplishes this through its advocacy for policy reform. It is the task of the Church in Africa to urge African governments to develop and implement policies that enhance economic growth and attract investment, thereby creating new employment opportunities for their people. Governments should be encouraged to prioritise sound economic policies that ensure the responsible utilisation of scarce national resources, safeguarding that citizens' basic needs are met while the benefits and responsibilities of resource allocation are equally shared. Furthermore, the Church must advocate for policies that compel governments to protect national resources to prevent waste and corruption (John Paul II 1995, 113).

Additionally, the Church must promote policies that improve and ennoble the individuals in their spiritual and material needs (John Paul II 1995, 70). The Church must advocate for good governance directed towards serving the common good, promoting justice and peace, and self-reliance (GCBC 2014f).

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined the role of the GCBC as a proactive advocate for social justice, aligned with the principles outlined in *Ecclesia in Africa*. The

document underscores essential values such as human dignity, justice, peace, and reconciliation, while emphasising commitment to the rights of the marginalised, and advocating for the preferential option for the poor. The efforts of the conference are crucial in addressing pressing social issues in the country, such as economic inequalities, political corruption, ethnic conflicts, and environmental degradation.

The findings of the study indicate that the GCBC's pastoral letters are deeply rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, which outline the importance of the love of neighbour and nurturing peace and harmony. This theological foundation reinforces the Church's mission in the light of social justice. However, despite the commitment by the GCBC to promote social justice, several challenges persist in Ghana, including systemic corruption, economic inequality, gender inequality, environmental degradation, and ethnic tensions, all of which hinder the full realisation of the Catholic Social Teaching.

*Ecclesia in Africa* serves as a guide for the Church's engagement in promoting human dignity, justice, and reconciliation across the continent. An analysis of the GCBC's recent pastoral letters reveals a deep focus on critical social issues in Ghanaian society. These documents advocate for structural reforms, equitable distribution of national resources, transparent governance, and the protection of human rights, indicating a consistent commitment to social justice. It is essential to note that *Ecclesia in Africa*, though published thirty years ago, remains relevant and can continue to illuminate and encourage the Church, local governments and society at large in their essential task to promote social justice in Africa.

This research reveals that the Church can promote social justice through various means, including education, fostering Christian attitudes and virtues, raising public awareness and assistance programmes, establishing inclusive and supportive networks, promoting the nobility of marriage and family, and advocating for policy change.

Overall, the research outlines the vital role of the GCBC in fostering social justice and its commitment to addressing the pressing issues facing Ghanaian society.

## **Recommendations**

The GCBC is recognised for its advocacy in promoting social justice in Ghana. However, there is a notable gap in public awareness regarding its advocacy programmes and various initiatives. Therefore, enhancing the visibility and public dissemination of its declarations on national issues is imperative for greater community engagement.

To maximise the impact of the GCBC, enhanced cooperation is essential among bishops, parishes, parish priests, Catholic schools, and hospitals. Strengthening this collaboration will ensure that social justice initiatives are effectively implemented at the grassroots level to ensure the involvement of the entire community.

Furthermore, while the teachings of the GCBC are essential, their implementation and societal impact necessitate ongoing evaluation and dialogue. The study's findings advocate for continued research into the effectiveness of these initiatives and their potential to foster meaningful social transformation in Ghanaian society.

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