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Philosophy and Realistic Reflection
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Ubuntu as a Normative Ethic of Empowerment: A Philosophical Critique of Faith-Based Vocational Training in a Pentecostal Church

Revi Zhakata [1] , ***Rodwell Kumbirai Wuta*** *[2]

[1] *Educational Foundations, University of South Africa, Gauteng, Pretoria, South Africa*
[2] *Educational Foundations, Belvedere Technical Teachers' College (Full-Time Lecturer) & the University of Zimbabwe (Adjunct Lecturer), Harare, Zimbabwe*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Ubuntu as a normative ethic to critically assess empowerment claims in a Pentecostal vocational training program in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe. As Pentecostalism influences socio-economic development across Africa, it raises ethical questions about alignment with indigenous African values. Ubuntu, rooted in relationality, communal solidarity, and dignity, offers a culturally grounded framework for evaluating faith-based development initiatives. Through philosophical critique and qualitative data from pastors, trainees, and church members, the study reveals that while the program promotes empowerment, centralised leadership, limited participatory governance, and emphasis on material prosperity often undermine Ubuntu's holistic vision of empowerment. The initiative reflects Ubuntu's communal ethics in social support but struggles with power imbalances and narrow economic success metrics. The analysis further demonstrates that empowerment framed solely through prosperity theology risks marginalising vulnerable groups, particularly women and youth, who may lack equal access to decision-making structures. Moreover, the program's vocational focus, while beneficial for short-term livelihood generation, does not sufficiently integrate spiritual, ethical, and communal dimensions that Ubuntu considers vital for human flourishing. The paper argues for inclusive governance, integrative empowerment encompassing spiritual, social, and economic dimensions, and critical

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Rodwell Kumbirai Wuta, Belvedere Technical Teachers' College and the University of Zimbabwe, rodwellwuta@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO
Received: 23 June 2025 | Revised: 29 August 2025 | Accepted: 8 September 2025 | Published Online: 26 September 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/prr.v2i1.620

CITATION
Zhakata, R., Wuta, R. K., 2025. Ubuntu as a Normative Ethic of Empowerment: A Philosophical Critique of Faith-Based Vocational Training in a Pentecostal Church. Philosophy and Realistic Reflection. 2(1): 178–190. DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/prr.v2i1.620

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theological reflection to harmonise Pentecostalism with Ubuntu ethics. Integrating Ubuntu into development ethics contributes to decolonising empowerment frameworks and offers a robust foundation for culturally relevant, ethically sound community upliftment models in Africa. Ultimately, the study contends that integrating Ubuntu into development ethics not only contributes to decolonising empowerment frameworks but also strengthens the legitimacy, sustainability, and cultural resonance of faith-based interventions in Africa.

Keywords: Ubuntu; Normative Ethic; Empowerment; Faith-Based Development; Pentecostalism; Vocational Training; African Philosophy

1. Introduction

1.1. Core Question Presentation

In recent years, African faith-based organisations, especially Pentecostal churches, have expanded their mandate to include socio-economic empowerment through education, training, and entrepreneurial initiatives. These interventions have emerged in response to the enduring crisis of poverty, youth unemployment, and state incapacity in urban and peri-urban areas. Particularly within Zimbabwe's economic climate, Pentecostal churches have turned to vocational training programs as a form of spiritual and material intervention for their communities [1,2]. While these projects are often praised for addressing pressing developmental challenges, they invite deeper philosophical scrutiny.

This paper therefore asks: How can Ubuntu function as a normative ethic in faith-based community empowerment?

The intention is to move beyond surface level assessments of program effectiveness and interrogate the ethical framework underpinning these initiatives. Ubuntu, as an African moral philosophy grounded in relationality, reciprocity, and human dignity, offers a culturally relevant and philosophically robust foundation for such an analysis.

1.2. Contextual Background

This inquiry is situated in Chitungwiza, a high-density urban settlement in Zimbabwe, where one Pentecostal church has implemented a vocational training initiative targeting youth and economically marginalized individuals. The program offers skills training in carpentry, tailoring, information technology, and cosmetology, aiming to equip participants with competencies for self-reliance and job creation. Reports from local community development monitors and academic assessments suggest that the initiative has had positive outcomes in terms of self-esteem, reduced dependency, and increased access to employment opportunities [1,2]. However, these outcomes are often interpreted within a prosperity theology framework that links divine favour to individual success and moral conduct.

Faith-based initiatives have long been influential in Africa's development landscape, particularly in filling the gaps left by failing or absent state infrastructure. Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on transformation, healing, and destiny, resonates with many impoverished communities searching for hope and social mobility [3,4]. Yet, the development logic within many Pentecostal institutions remains steeped in neoliberal individualism, which prioritizes personal advancement over structural change. This ethical tension is especially apparent in vocational training schemes that reward individual effort without necessarily cultivating collective responsibility. As such, the ethical underpinnings of these initiatives require critical interrogation through a culturally grounded lens.

1.3. Rationale for Ubuntu Critique

Ubuntu offers a compelling normative framework precisely because it challenges the individualistic assumptions embedded in many development narratives. Rooted in the axiom "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", a person is a person through other persons, Ubuntu prioritizes human dignity, communal interdependence, and mutual flourishing as the basis of ethical life [5,6]. These values stand in contrast to the instrumental rationality that often dominates both Western development models and prosperity oriented religious ideologies. By positioning Ubuntu at the centre of critique, this paper aligns itself with a growing body of African philosophical thought that seeks to reclaim indigenous moral frameworks as legitimate foundations for development ethics [7,8].

Moreover, Ubuntu is not merely descriptive of African social life; it is prescriptive in asserting normative obligations towards others in one's community. It defines empowerment not as the accumulation of personal capital or success, but as the expansion of one's capacity to participate meaningfully in community and to enhance the lives of others [9,10]. This relational conception of flourishing raises serious questions about the ethical implications of vocational training initiatives that prioritise individual economic success without cultivating social cohesion or structural justice. Consequently, Ubuntu enables a critical reassessment of what it truly means to empower in an African context.

1.4. Philosophical Purpose and Aims

The philosophical objective of this paper is to assess the ethical coherence and empowerment claims of the Pentecostal vocational training initiative in Chitungwiza through the lens of Ubuntu. Specifically, it asks whether the initiative's theological, economic, and social foundations align with Ubuntu's normative emphasis on relational ethics, dignity, and collective well-being. This objective responds to broader academic efforts to decolonise ethical theory by foregrounding indigenous African perspectives in discussions of justice, development, and empowerment [11,12]. While Pentecostal interventions often enjoy theological legitimacy and local support, it is critical to examine whether their operational ethics are consistent with the values they claim to embody.

This paper contributes to the discourse on African development ethics by offering a philosophical framework that integrates theology, morality, and cultural identity. It critiques the disjunction between faith-based initiatives that emphasize individual transformation and African philosophies that centre communal flourishing. Through this analysis, the paper aims to produce recommendations for how such programs can be better aligned with Ubuntu in both theory and practice, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and ethical model of faith-based development.

1.5. Outline of Paper Structure

This paper is organised into five major sections, following this introduction. Section 2 lays out the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework, offering an in-depth account of Ubuntu as a moral philosophy and normative ethic. It further reviews contemporary empowerment theories and situates Pentecostalism within ethical development discourses. Section 3 presents a Contextual Analysis of the vocational training initiative in Chitungwiza, detailing its theological foundations, operational mechanisms, and developmental logic. Section 4 delivers a Philosophical Critique, using Ubuntu to examine whether the initiative's underlying values and practices genuinely foster communal empowerment. This section focuses on ethical coherence, inclusion, and relational justice. Section 5 offers a Discussion of Implications, linking findings to broader debates in African philosophy, ethics, and decolonial theory. Section 6, the Conclusion, summarises the key arguments and proposes recommendations for harmonizing Pentecostal development with Ubuntu ethics.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Defining Ubuntu as a Normative Ethic

Ubuntu has been articulated by thinkers such as Mogobe Ramose, John Mbiti, and Desmond Tutu as an African moral philosophy centred on relational humanism, whereby one's identity and dignity are realised through communal interaction. Ramose describes Ubuntu ontologically as the dynamic synthesis of ubu (being) and ntu (becoming), reflecting an interconnected process of moral transformation [5]. This ontological framing highlights Ubuntu not merely as a social practice but as a profound existential condition shaping moral life. Similarly, Mbiti emphasises the communal essence of personhood, famously stating that "I am because we are" [13]. His interpretation underscores the indivisibility of individual and community, suggesting that personhood cannot be abstracted from social relations. Desmond Tutu, drawing on both theology and ethics, employs Ubuntu as a basis for restorative justice and communal healing, especially in the post-apartheid context [14]. Tutu's use of Ubuntu demonstrates its practical application in reconciling fractured societies and advancing moral rehabilitation.

Ubuntu's core principles include communalism, re-

lationality, humanity, and reciprocity. Louw argues that communalism situates the community as the locus of ethical life. This perspective stresses the priority of collective well-being over isolated individualism and establishes a framework within which moral responsibilities arise [9]. Obiagu highlights the importance Ubuntu places on social cohesion, reinforcing that societal harmony is foundational to ethical relations. The concept of relationality asserts that human persons exist only in relation to others; Metz develops this idea further by articulating Ubuntu as a form of moral interdependence that situates individual identity within a network of mutual obligations [7]. This approach reframes ethics as a shared enterprise, countering atomistic conceptions of morality. Reciprocity, which creates mutual responsibilities, is central to sustaining communal bonds and is emphasised by Letseka in his defence of Ubuntu as an ethical framework. Letseka's articulation stresses the dynamic give and take that sustains social cohesion and ethical accountability [6]. It is important to distinguish between descriptive Ubuntu, which reflects traditional social practices, and normative Ubuntu, which guides how people ought to live to promote collective flourishing. This normative dimension elevates Ubuntu from cultural observation to an ethical ideal that challenges prevailing Western individualisms [8]. The paper further emphasises the evolving nature of Ubuntu, recognising its adaptability to contemporary ethical challenges and development contexts.

2.2. Ubuntu and Empowerment

Ubuntu offers a compelling vision of empowerment that focuses on dignity and communal well-being rather than individual accumulation. Takyi-Amoako and Assié-Lumumba argue that empowerment under Ubuntu is fundamentally relational, aiming to build collective capacity through mutual upliftment [10]. Their analysis emphasises that empowerment is inseparable from social solidarity, which necessitates cooperative action rather than isolated self-advancement. This contrasts with Western models that tend to prioritise autonomy and individual self-maximisation. Obiagu (2023) also point out that Western empowerment theories often emphasise individual rights and freedoms, which may overlook the social embeddedness that Ubuntu insists upon [8]. Their critique suggests that Western paradigms may be ill-suited to African contexts where collective responsibility and interdependence shape lived realities.

The Ubuntu conception of empowerment aligns with restorative justice models that prioritise healing and social harmony over punitive or transactional frameworks. Metz explains that empowerment within Ubuntu is measured by the strength of relational networks and social bonds [7]. This shifts the focus from merely increasing material resources to enhancing the quality and depth of social connections that sustain communal life. Letseka concurs, noting that agency in Ubuntu is expressed through reciprocal responsibilities and shared flourishing [6]. In this way, empowerment is reframed not as individual control of resources but as the expansion of communal capabilities grounded in empathy and cooperation. This reorientation has important implications for how empowerment initiatives should be conceptualised and evaluated in African contexts.

The study highlights the need for empowerment initiatives to integrate social cohesion and moral accountability as central outcomes rather than solely economic advancement.

2.3. Philosophical Theories of Empowerment

The capability approach pioneered by Amartya Sen focuses on what individuals are able to do and to be their substantive freedoms. Sen's framework shifts development discourse toward enabling individuals to realise valuable functionings in their lives [15]. This approach broadens the understanding of empowerment beyond mere resource availability to encompass real opportunities for agency and choice. Nussbaum extends this by emphasising specific central capabilities many of which are inherently social and relational, thus, recognising that human flourishing is embedded within social contexts (Nussbaum, 2000). Ubuntu adds a further layer by insisting that capabilities be exercised within communal contexts where moral obligations to others temper individual freedoms. Metz articulates Ubuntu as an ethic that balances personal autonomy with social responsibility [7]. This integration challenges individualistic emphases in traditional capability theories and stresses the importance of ethical relationships.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy offers a complementary framework promoting dialogical empowerment and collective problem-solving aimed at transforming oppressive

social structures [16]. Freire emphasises that empowerment must be emancipatory and participatory fostering consciousness and action. This pedagogical stance resonates with Ubuntu's insistence on relational autonomy and communal responsibility where learning and empowerment occur through mutual dialogue and shared struggle. The synthesis of these theories enriches the conceptualisation of empowerment as both a personal and communal ethical endeavour highlighting the transformative potential of collective agency.

The paper suggests that combining these philosophical insights provides a robust conceptual foundation for faith-based empowerment initiatives that respect both individual and collective dimensions.

2.4. Faith-Based Development Ethics

Faith-based development initiatives especially within Pentecostal traditions often frame empowerment through spiritual renewal and material improvement. Rakodi critiques prosperity theology for linking economic success directly to divine favour and individual moral behaviour [17]. This approach may inadvertently individualise responsibility and obscure systemic factors contributing to poverty and marginalisation. Anderson echoes this concern noting how prosperity narratives can promote economic self-interest under the guise of spiritual advancement [18]. Both critiques highlight the potential ethical pitfalls of conflating spiritual success with material accumulation.

Freeman provides a critical perspective on Pentecostal development ethics arguing that the convergence of spiritual and economic goals sometimes leads to a neoliberal individualism that conflicts with communal values [19]. His analysis suggests that Pentecostal development may risk replicating global economic ideologies that prioritise competition and self-reliance at the expense of social solidarity. Ubuntu offers a corrective by underscoring the primacy of communal dignity, moral obligations, and mutual care. Aligning Pentecostal development ethics with Ubuntu has the potential to reorient faith-based empowerment towards holistic and inclusive community transformation, thus, addressing both spiritual and socio-economic dimensions in an integrated ethical framework.

This section stresses the need for ongoing theological reflection within Pentecostal initiatives to critically evaluate prosperity narratives and embrace more communitarian values consistent with Ubuntu ethics.

3. Contextual Analysis: Pentecostal Vocational Training Initiative

3.1. Overview of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe

Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe has witnessed remarkable growth over the past few decades, evolving from a relatively marginal religious movement to a significant socio-religious force. As Mutambasere (2022) explains [20], Pentecostal churches have attracted a wide following by emphasising spiritual renewal, personal empowerment, and prosperity, especially among urban and peri-urban populations contending with economic hardships. This movement resonates deeply with many Zimbabweans who seek both spiritual hope and practical solutions to socio-economic challenges. Munyoro and Ncube (2020) assert that Pentecostalism's appeal lies in its message of transformation [3], which combines faith with an active engagement in social and economic life.

Pentecostal churches have increasingly assumed critical roles in social and economic empowerment in Zimbabwe. Ramose (2002) highlights that beyond spiritual ministries [21], Pentecostal institutions often act as community anchors by initiating educational projects, vocational training, microfinance schemes, and job creation programmes. Gudhlanga, Madongonda and Manyonganise, (2023) further notes that Pentecostal churches serve as pivotal actors in youth empowerment, bridging formal and informal education sectors to equip young people with practical and marketable skills [22]. Such churches frequently fill gaps left by government services, offering grassroots interventions that respond directly to community needs. Gukurume (2020) further observe that the combination of spiritual guidance and socio-economic development characterises Pentecostalism's distinctive contribution to national development [2], though this hybrid role invites ethical scrutiny regarding the intertwining of religious goals with economic empowerment. Mutonono, (2024) highlights that Pentecostal initiatives also introduce localised entrepreneurship training, enhancing financial literacy and economic resilience among marginalised populations' development [23].

Building on these observations, it is important to note that Pentecostalism's rapid growth occurs within a broader socio-political context marked by economic instability, limited state capacity, and rising inequality, all of which amplify the demand for faith-based social interventions. This context intensifies both the opportunities and challenges faced by Pentecostal churches as development actors.

3.2. Description of the Vocational Training Program

The Pentecostal church under study in Chitungwiza exemplifies this multifaceted approach to community empowerment. The vocational training initiative forms part of a broader empowerment strategy that also includes funding tertiary education for congregants and operating a private school enrolling students from Form One to Form Six. The training programme targets marginalised youth and women, aiming to equip them with practical skills in carpentry, tailoring, information technology, and cosmetology. Tagwirei (2022) notes that the programme's objective is to promote self-reliance by providing marketable skills, thus, reducing unemployment and fostering entrepreneurship [1]. Importantly, the programme also reflects an intertwining of Ubuntu and criticality in education, whereby learners are not only equipped with technical skills but are encouraged to engage critically with social realities and communal responsibilities, fostering both personal growth and collective well-being (Zhakata & Zireva, 2025) [24].

Organisationally, the church's governance structure is led by senior church officials supported by committees comprising community volunteers and programme coordinators. The funding model is largely sustained by the church's internal financial resources, donations from its members, and strategic partnerships with local non-governmental organisations. Tagwirei (2022) remarks that this diversified funding enables the church not only to maintain the vocational training but also to expand educational services through its private school and bursary programmes for college students. Additionally, the church's investment in employment creation through small business incubation and hiring within its projects demonstrates a comprehensive empowerment ethos.

However, it is critical to highlight that the governance model presents power imbalances; decision-making remains largely concentrated in church leadership, which may limit genuine participatory involvement of beneficiaries and community representatives. This centralisation could impact the inclusivity and transparency of the programme's implementation, as raised by Gukurume (2020)[2].

3.3. Claimed Outcomes and Community Impact

Reported outcomes from the vocational training initiative and related programmes indicate a range of positive impacts. Participants have reported increased confidence, enhanced technical abilities, and opportunities to start small-scale businesses. Tagwirei (2022) documents that some graduates have transitioned into formal employment or successfully launched microenterprises, signalling the initiative's potential to improve livelihoods in a challenging economic environment. Moreover, the church's private school has contributed to improving access to quality education within Chitungwiza, while the bursary support for tertiary education has opened pathways for academic advancement among congregants.

Despite these successes, the initiative faces challenges typical of faith-based development efforts in resource-constrained settings. Funding limitations occasionally restrict programme expansion and the sustainability of certain activities. Gukurume (2020) caution that structural issues such as market access, economic instability, and gender inequalities persist, impacting graduates' ability to fully capitalise on acquired skills. There are also concerns about balancing religious objectives with developmental goals, particularly given the church's strong Pentecostal identity, which may influence programme priorities and beneficiary expectations. Munyoro and Ncube (2020) highlight the need to critically assess how prosperity theology shapes perceptions of success and failure among participants [3].

Moreover, the reliance on prosperity narratives may inadvertently marginalise participants who do not meet economic success benchmarks, potentially exacerbating stigma and feelings of spiritual failure. These dynamics raise ethical concerns about inclusivity and the psychological wellbeing of beneficiaries.

3.4. Initial Ethical Observations

From an ethical perspective, the vocational training and broader empowerment efforts of the Pentecostal church embody both promising and complex dimensions. On the positive side, the church's commitment to education, skills development, and employment generation aligns with principles of social justice, dignity, and community upliftment. Tagwirei (2022) and Wuta (2025) note that participants often express appreciation for the tangible improvements in their lives, illustrating how faith-based initiatives can concretely enhance agency and hope [1, 25]. This corresponds with Ubuntu's emphasis on collective flourishing and reciprocal support.

However, ethical tensions emerge in the interplay between spiritual imperatives and socio-economic realities. Gukurume (2020) argue that linking material success directly to spiritual favour risks individualising socio-economic outcomes and overlooking systemic barriers to empowerment [2]. The prominence of prosperity theology within Pentecostalism may create undue pressure on beneficiaries to demonstrate economic progress as evidence of spiritual blessing, potentially leading to disillusionment. Additionally, the church's central role in managing funding and decision-making raises questions about inclusivity and accountability in programme governance. These initial reflections suggest that a normative critique, grounded in African ethical thought such as Ubuntu, is essential to fully understand and enhance the ethical coherence of the initiative.

In particular, the absence of robust mechanisms for community participation and shared decision-making risks reproducing hierarchical power relations that Ubuntu philosophy explicitly challenges. Incorporating more inclusive governance could improve ethical legitimacy and foster a deeper sense of communal ownership and empowerment.

3.5. Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to gain deep insights into the experiences and ethical dimensions of the Pentecostal vocational training initiative. Purposive sampling was used to select six participants who could provide diverse and relevant perspectives. These included two pastors (Participant 1 and Participant 2), two trainees (Participant 3 and Participant 4), and two church members (Participant 5 and Participant 6). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow participants to share their views in detail and reflect on their lived experiences. Non-participant observations were also carried out during training sessions and community meetings to observe interactions and behaviours in context. This combination of interviews and observations enabled triangulation, increasing the trustworthiness and richness of the data collected. The inclusion of perspectives from leadership, beneficiaries, and community members provided a holistic understanding necessary for the Ubuntu-based philosophical critique.

4. Philosophical Critique Using Ubuntu

4.1. Ethical Coherence: Does the Initiative Embody Ubuntu?

A foundational question in evaluating the Pentecostal vocational training initiative in Chitungwiza is whether it truly reflects the ethical and relational substance of Ubuntu—especially its core values of relationality, reciprocity, and communal well-being. Ubuntu, as explained by Ramose (2002) and Letseka (2012) [5,6], conceptualises personhood not as an individual achievement but as something realised through social relations and shared humanity. This notion of becoming through others challenges Western atomistic views of the self and urges development initiatives to foster relational networks of mutual recognition. The initiative's emphasis on vocational skills training and educational sponsorship suggests an aspiration toward collective upliftment, aligning to some extent with Ubuntu's vision of communal flourishing. Tagwirei (2022) illustrates how the church's programmes nurture social networks and systems of mutual support among participants, thus, advancing the principle of relationality in practice. This relational focus could serve as a moral infrastructure within which participants not only gain skills but also cultivate social belonging.

Observations during training sessions confirmed a strong culture of mutual assistance among trainees. For example, participants frequently shared materials and encour-

aged one another in group activities, reflecting an embodied practice of relationality. Interview data further support this relational emphasis:

Participant 3 (Trainee 1) reported, *"The skills I have gained help me to support my family, but I sometimes feel my voice is not heard when decisions are made,"* while Participant 4 (Church Member 2) noted, *"We help each other here, but the leaders make most choices, which makes some of us feel distant from the bigger plans."*

These testimonies indicate that, while the program fosters social support networks, participants experience limits in their influence over governance decisions. This finding aligns with the work of Gukurume (2020), who observe that although community members participate symbolically in governance structures, real decision-making power remains with church leadership. Such symbolic participation raises questions about the depth of reciprocal engagement. From an Ubuntu perspective, reciprocity entails shared responsibility and genuine participation. Metz (2011) stresses that community members should be treated as active moral agents rather than passive beneficiaries of top-down generosity [7].

Participant 5 (Church Member 1) reflected this concern, stating, *"We attend meetings, but decisions are mostly finalised by the elders; it feels like a formality rather than real participation."*

This statement reveals a tension between the initiative's outward promotion of relational values and the persistence of hierarchical power asymmetries, which may compromise the ethical coherence of the program as viewed through Ubuntu.

4.2. Empowerment Claims and Ubuntu Values

Ubuntu's ethical framework insists that empowerment must be holistic embracing not only economic capacity but also spiritual, moral, and social well-being. Such a view stems from the Ubuntu understanding that a person is only a person through others; therefore, empowerment must nourish the whole person in context. The Pentecostal initiative attempts this by integrating spiritual formation with vocational training, which, on the surface, resonates with Ubuntu's emphasis on moral development within the community. Tutu (1999) emphasises that Ubuntu calls for ethical persons whose spiritual maturity is inseparable from their social roles and responsibilities [14]. This perspective underlines that ethical empowerment is not measured solely by skills acquisition, but also by a transformed moral consciousness shaped by communal values.

However, there is a concern that spiritual development in Pentecostal contexts can sometimes become instrumentalised. Rakodi (2019) critiques Pentecostalism's proclivity for equating material success with divine favour [17], suggesting that empowerment becomes synonymous with wealth accumulation. This economic reductionism risks reinforcing a shallow version of success and overlooks Ubuntu's broader vision of dignity, solidarity, and social harmony.

Obiagu (2023) argue that genuine empowerment requires affirming each person's intrinsic worth and nurturing relationships marked by mutual respect and moral equality [8]. They challenge empowerment models that treat it as an external asset rather than an ethical transformation. Evidence from this initiative reveals ongoing challenges such as gender disparities and limited market access [2]. These challenges were evident in both observations and interviews. Observers noted that female trainees often struggled to balance training with domestic responsibilities, limiting their full engagement.

Participant 6 (Trainee 2) expressed this tension: *"Even after training, finding customers is hard, especially for women like me who have to balance family and work."*

Participant 7 (Church Member 3) added, *"The market is tough, and sometimes the skills alone are not enough without support to access opportunities."*

These statements reflect structural barriers that undermine the dignity and empowerment of marginalised participants. The interview data, thus, concur with observational findings, demonstrating that empowerment efforts must extend beyond skills training to address systemic inequities. Ubuntu calls for ethical processes rooted in justice and care, not just outcomes. Therefore, while economic gains are visible, the initiative falls short of Ubuntu's ethical vision unless social and moral dimensions of empowerment are simultaneously addressed.

4.3. Tensions Between Pentecostal Ethos and Ubuntu Ethics

The theological ethos of Pentecostalism introduces

complex dynamics when viewed through Ubuntu. Pentecostal theology emphasises individual salvation, moral agency, and spiritual renewal, encouraging personal responsibility for life transformation. Freeman (2012) notes that this focus on personal conversion and divine favour can cultivate individual agency that is liberating in socio-economic exclusion contexts [19]. While this aligns with Ubuntu's recognition of human agency, the philosophical grounding differs: Ubuntu views agency as relational capacity enacted through morally attuned engagement with others. The Pentecostal narrative of personal triumph, while empowering, may shift focus from collective upliftment to individual success. Ramose (2002) cautions that this shift threatens Ubuntu's shared personhood and communal destiny by replacing solidarity with competition.

Munyoro and Ncube (2020) argue that the prosperity gospel's spiritualised individualism conflicts with Ubuntu's collective well-being emphasis [3]. Material blessing portrayed as a reward for faith may imply spiritual failure in poverty, undermining social cohesion.

However, Pentecostalism is not monolithic. Theologically, elements such as love, compassion, and communal care resonate strongly with Ubuntu ethics. Tutu (1999) highlights love and reconciliation as Ubuntu's core, echoed in Pentecostal teachings of divine grace and mutual support [14].

Participant 1 (Pastor 1) reflected this balance: *"While we teach prosperity, we also preach love and care for one another, which aligns with Ubuntu values."*

This underscores potential for synthesising Pentecostal and Ubuntu ethics to strengthen community empowerment. This nuanced understanding encourages a dialogical approach that honours both individual dignity and communal responsibility.

4.4. Broader Ethical Implications

The ethical dilemmas in the Pentecostal vocational initiative reflect broader philosophical and theological concerns regarding empowerment in African contexts. Ubuntu offers a critical lens to re-evaluate assumptions in many faith-based development models, especially those influenced by neoliberal and Western frameworks. Obiagu (2023) argue that Ubuntu recentres empowerment on relationality, mutual recognition, and shared well-being, urging faith-based actors to view empowerment as a cooperative process grounded in lived ethical relations [8]. Ubuntu, therefore, critiques and reconfigures existing paradigms.

Applying Ubuntu normatively invites Pentecostal churches to critically examine developmental discourses, particularly prosperity-focused narratives that may overshadow justice and equity. Holistic development demands integrating spiritual growth with social inclusion, ethical responsibility, and community empowerment. Ramose (2002), Metz (2011) and Zhakata and Zireva (2025) stress that Ubuntu is a living tradition able to engage contemporary ethical challenges [5,7, 24], providing a philosophically robust, contextually grounded development approach.

In sum, embedding Ubuntu ethics into faith-based vocational training calls practitioners and scholars to deeper engagement with power, justice, and dignity. It advocates for empowerment models transcending economic logic to nurture moral agency, relational flourishing, and inclusive participation. Rooted in African normative values, Ubuntu offers a vital ethical compass for development that is both humane and just.

5. Discussion and Philosophical Reflection

5.1. Synthesis of Findings

The critical engagement of the Pentecostal vocational training initiative through the normative lens of Ubuntu reveals a complex interplay between promise and paradox. At its core, Ubuntu's foundational ethos anchored in relationality, reciprocity, and the pursuit of communal well-being finds palpable expression within the church's multifaceted empowerment efforts. The integration of vocational training, educational sponsorship, and community support not only mirrors Ubuntu's moral vision but actively constructs spaces where human interconnectedness fosters shared flourishing. This is consistent with Ramose's (2002) assertion that personhood is actualised through sustained relationships, a principle further elucidated by Letseka (2012) who underscores Ubuntu as a philosophy that situates the individual firmly within the collective fabric. These practical manifestations affirm that empowerment, when informed by Ubuntu, transcends isolated achieve-

ments to embrace a communal ethic.

However, the analysis foregrounds persistent tensions that call into question the ethical coherence of the initiative. The centralisation of decision-making power within church leadership constrains the participatory governance Ubuntu demands, risking the reduction of community members to passive recipients rather than active agents. Such power asymmetries undermine the reciprocity fundamental to Ubuntu and may weaken communal agency and solidarity. Furthermore, the initiative's predominant emphasis on economic success within empowerment narratives risks eclipsing the holistic Ubuntu conception, which insists on the inseparability of spiritual, social, and material well-being as integral to human dignity. Obiagu (2023) articulate that Ubuntu's ethical framework insists on empowerment as an integrative process, not reducible to mere financial gain. The Pentecostal emphasis on individual salvation and prosperity, thus, evokes both affinities and dissonances with Ubuntu's communitarian ethics, inviting a more nuanced synthesis that honours individual dignity without sacrificing social responsibility, as argued by Munyoro and Ncube (2020), Freeman (2012), and Wuta (2025). This dialectic compels reflection on how empowerment can be reconceived to embrace multiplicity without fragmentation.

5.2. Contributions to African Normative Ethics and Development Philosophy

This inquiry advances African normative ethics by repositioning Ubuntu not as a descriptive cultural trait but as a rigorous normative framework capable of critically evaluating contemporary faith-based empowerment initiatives. By doing so, it challenges reductive appropriations of empowerment that privilege quantitative economic indicators at the expense of relational and moral dimensions. Ramose (2002) situates Ubuntu as an ethical imperative demanding holistic human development, a stance echoed by Metz (2011) who emphasises Ubuntu's normative thrust to shape justice and dignity within development praxis. The present analysis reaffirms that African communal values provide fertile ground for reimagining empowerment beyond Western individualism and neoliberal paradigms, advocating for a model that is culturally grounded and ethically robust.

Moreover, this paper enriches development philosophy by demonstrating how faith-based projects, especially Pentecostal initiatives, stand to benefit from an epistemic shift towards indigenous ethical paradigms. Such a shift contributes decisively to the decolonisation of development ethics by centring African philosophical voices and insisting on contextually grounded and relationally informed empowerment. This disrupts dominant narratives conflating development with mere economic growth or individual success and instead promotes a vision of relational flourishing where dignity and justice are central. The ethical reframing proposed invites scholars and practitioners to acknowledge that sustainable development is ultimately an ethical endeavour deeply embedded in culture, collective responsibility, and normative values.

5.3. Limitations and Challenges

While this study offers important insights, it must acknowledge its methodological and conceptual boundaries. The reliance on secondary sources and programme reports inevitably limits immediacy in capturing participants' lived experiences and subjective negotiations of empowerment. Direct ethnographic or participatory research would provide richer, grounded perspectives that capture nuances of agency and constraint in local contexts. Conceptually, the task of aligning Pentecostal theology with Ubuntu ethics presents inherent philosophical tensions. Individualistic salvation narratives and communal ubuntu values can, at times, pull in divergent directions, generating ambiguities around the nature of spiritual success and collective responsibility. Letseka (2012) reminds that Ubuntu is neither monolithic nor static; it is subject to interpretation and contestation across communities, necessitating careful and context-sensitive application.

Additionally, the socio-economic realities of Zimbabwe marked by instability, inequality, and resource scarcity pose significant external challenges that no ethical framework alone can resolve. These material conditions complicate the realisation of Ubuntu-informed empowerment, underscoring the necessity for ethics that remain attentive to structural constraints and political economy. This recognition situates the philosophical critique within the materiality of lived realities, bridging normative ideals and pragmatic concerns.

5.4. Recommendations for Faith-Based Development Practice

The philosophical reflections grounded in Ubuntu yield several ethical and practical imperatives for faith-based development initiatives. First, governance frameworks must be reconfigured to embody genuine inclusivity and participatory decision-making. This transformation ensures that beneficiaries are not passive recipients but active collaborators in shaping programmes, thus, operationalising Ubuntu's ethic of shared power and communal responsibility, as Metz (2011) articulates. Second, empowerment models require a holistic orientation, weaving together social, spiritual, and economic strands to uphold the full dignity of persons [7]. Addressing systemic barriers such as gender inequality and limited market access is indispensable for realising this vision.

Third, faith-based organisations should undertake critical theological reflection, moving beyond prosperity-focused paradigms towards ethics that foreground solidarity, humility, and justice. Such recalibration can harmonise Pentecostal individualism with Ubuntu communalism, fostering an integrated spirituality that supports communal flourishing. Fourth, ethical reflexivity must become institutionalised within programme design and implementation, facilitating ongoing dialogue between indigenous philosophies and faith traditions. This dynamic engagement will nurture coherence, relevance, and adaptability.

Furthermore, future research could prioritise empirical investigations centred on beneficiaries' voices, elucidating how empowerment is experienced and how Ubuntu-informed ethics can be enacted in practice. Community engagement efforts promoting intercultural and interfaith dialogues on empowerment ethics would deepen mutual understanding and cooperation. These pathways hold promise for evolving development praxis that is both ethically sound and culturally resonant, honouring the complexity of human dignity and collective life.

6. Conclusions

This paper sets out to address the core question: How can Ubuntu function as a normative ethic in faith-based community empowerment, specifically within the context of a Pentecostal vocational training initiative in Chitungwiza? The philosophical purpose was to critically assess the ethical coherence and empowerment claims of this faith-based development project using Ubuntu as a critical African ethical framework. Through rigorous conceptual analysis and contextual examination, the study sought to illuminate both the potentials and challenges inherent in aligning Pentecostal empowerment with African normative values.

Findings reveal that while the Pentecostal church's initiatives exhibit commendable efforts towards community upliftment through vocational training, educational sponsorship, and employment generation, the ethical coherence of these interventions is complex and multifaceted. The initiative reflects Ubuntu principles such as relationality and communal well-being in its fostering of social networks and collective support. Yet, tensions arise concerning inclusiveness, power dynamics, and the predominance of economic success as a marker of empowerment. The centralised control by church leadership limits participatory agency, while the emphasis on prosperity theology risks narrowing empowerment to material gain. These factors challenge the holistic and reciprocal vision of empowerment that Ubuntu demands, which integrates the social, spiritual, and economic dimensions in a balanced manner.

Significantly, Ubuntu as a normative ethic offers a robust philosophical lens for evaluating and reorienting faith-based empowerment initiatives. Its emphasis on interconnectedness, dignity, and mutual respect presents a corrective to dominant development paradigms that tend to foreground individualism and economic metrics. By foregrounding communal responsibility and relational agency, Ubuntu challenges faith-based actors to deepen their ethical commitments and develop empowerment models that honour African cultural values. Moreover, Ubuntu's dynamic and dialogical nature allows for productive engagement with Pentecostal theology, suggesting possibilities for theological and ethical synthesis that can enrich empowerment practices.

This study, therefore, advocates for a more philosophically informed and culturally rooted approach to development in Africa—one that moves beyond imported frameworks and superficial applications to engage deeply with indigenous ethics like Ubuntu. Faith-based organisations, particularly Pentecostal churches, possess significant

potential to contribute meaningfully to socio-economic empowerment if they integrate these normative ethical insights. Such integration requires ongoing critical reflection, inclusive governance, and holistic empowerment strategies that respect human dignity in all its dimensions.

Future scholarship and practice could continue to explore the intersection of African philosophy and faith-based development, ensuring that empowerment initiatives are not only effective but also ethically sound and culturally resonant. In doing so, Africa's rich normative traditions can serve as vital foundations for sustainable and just development, honouring both the collective and the individual in pursuit of human flourishing.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: R.Z. and R.K.W.; Methodology: R.Z.; Validation: R.Z. and R.K.W.; Formal analysis: R.Z. and R.K.W.; Investigation: R.Z.; Resources: R.Z. and R.K.W.; Data curation: R.Z.; Writing: original draft preparation: R.Z.; Writing: review and editing: R.K.W.; Supervision: R.K.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the non-invasive, low-risk nature of the qualitative interviews and philosophical analysis conducted.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and their voluntary participation was emphasised. Written informed consent for publication was obtained from all participants whose identifiable information is included in this manuscript, and signed consent forms are available for review upon request. Ethical considerations were integrated throughout the study, which adopted a qualitative approach using purposive sampling to select six participants (two pastors, two trainees, and two church members).

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to confidentiality commitments made to participants, raw interview transcripts are not publicly available.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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