African Pentecostal Churches as Mediating Institutions of Socio-Economic Integration among African Migrants in Cape Town

Author
Dr. Anjofui Patience Anegub

Affiliation
Postdoctoral fellow, Department of Religion, University of Johannesburg

ORCID link
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6138-8027

Correspondence to
Dr. Anjofui Patience Anegub

E-mail
patychrist88@gmail.com

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Abstract
This study examines African Pentecostal Churches as mediating institutions of socio-economic integration among African migrants in Cape Town, South Africa. Drawing on Social Capital Theory, it explores how church-based networks facilitate migrants' access to resources, opportunities, and support. Using a qualitative multiple case study design, the research draws on interviews and participant observation conducted across five African Pentecostal Churches. The findings indicate that these churches function as hybrid institutions that provide spiritual, social, and economic support through largely informal, trust-based relationships. Bonding and bridging social capital emerged as the primary mechanisms through which migrants accessed emotional support, information, employment opportunities, and livelihood resources. Although linking social capital was also evident, it remained largely informal and dependent on the personal networks of pastors and influential congregants rather than formal institutional partnerships. While these networks enhance migrants' short-term adaptation and access to livelihoods, they may also reinforce dependency, reproduce inequalities, and constrain long-term socio-economic mobility and broader societal integration. The study contributes to migration and religion scholarship by demonstrating that African Pentecostal Churches are important, yet constrained mediators of migrant integration. It further advances Social Capital Theory by indicating that integration is supported primarily through bonding and bridging social capital in contexts where linking social capital remains weak and informal, limiting the transformative potential of faith-based support networks.

Keywords: African migrants, African Pentecostal Churches, Cape Town, socio-economic integration, social capital

Introduction
Migration is a global phenomenon driven by the search for improved socio-economic opportunities and an escape from conflict and instability. South Africa has emerged as a key destination, hosting approximately 3 to 3.1 million international migrants, representing about 5.1% of the population (StatsSA, 2025). Despite these opportunities, migrants often face significant socio-economic challenges,

including labor market exclusion, precarious employment, discrimination, and persistent xenophobic violence (Nnadozie and Morojele, 2024), which undermine their everyday experiences and hinder meaningful integration into host communities.

Within this context, African Pentecostalism emerges as a key social institution supporting migrants facing displacement and marginalization. Religion plays an important role in fostering social cohesion and stability (Schwab, 2016; Beckford, 2019), while also providing migrants with symbolic and material resources for integration (Katz, 2022). African Pentecostal Churches extend beyond spiritual functions to serve as socio-cultural spaces where migrants build networks, construct belonging, negotiate identities, and access social services (White, 2014; Ambrosini, Bonizzoni and Molli, 2021; Zanfrini and Antonelli, 2020; Derksen, 2021; Thomas, 2023). Their emphasis on experiential spirituality and communal solidarity enhances their relevance for migrants seeking stability in unfamiliar environments.

Existing scholarship demonstrates that Pentecostal Churches play a critical role in fostering a sense of belonging, preserving cultural identity, providing social cohesion and emotional and spiritual support among migrant communities (Dube, 2017; Cazarin, 2019; Mukafuku, 2021; Hankela, Swart and Nishimwe, 2022). However, four important gaps remain. First, conceptually, existing studies have largely examined churches as spaces of spiritual and social support rather than mediating institutions that facilitate socio-economic integration; second, methodologically, the literature relies predominantly on ethnographic and descriptive approaches that focus on migrants' religious experiences, identity formation, and community participation (Dube, 2017; White, 2021; Katz, 2022). While these studies provide valuable insights into migrants' lived experiences, they offer a limited empirical analysis of the mechanisms through which church participation influences economic outcomes; third, geographically, comparatively little attention has been paid to African urban contexts such as South Africa, where migrants frequently encounter xenophobia, labor market exclusion, and legal precarity; and finally, from a theoretical perspective, there has been a limited application of integration frameworks, particularly social capital theory, to examine the socio-economic outcomes of migrant Pentecostalism. Consequently, the role of African Pentecostal Churches as mediating institutions that connect migrants to employment opportunities, livelihood resources, and social networks remains underexplored.

This study examines how African Pentecostal Churches function as mediating institutions that promote the socio-economic integration of African migrants in Cape Town, drawing on Social Capital Theory to conceptualize them as networks of trust and reciprocal exchange. It explores how church-based relationships enable access to employment, information, and support systems. Guided by three research questions on the churches' support functions, relational networks, and structural limitations, the study highlights both the opportunities and constraints of these religious networks. Ultimately, it contributes to debates on migration, religion, and development by positioning Pentecostal Churches as dual sites of resilience and potential drivers of socio-economic transformation within migrants' integration in urban South Africa.

Pentecostalism: Origins and Global Expansion

Pentecostalism originated in marginalized, often migrant-based congregations but has evolved into a globally influential movement, now comprising an estimated 250 to 500 million adherents (Resane, 2022; Gooren, 2004; Adogame, 2024). Its expansion is closely linked to key historical moments such as the Azusa Street Revival of 1906, which catalyzed its global spread (Gifford and Nogueira-Godsey, 2011; Kalu, 2008).

Central to Pentecostalism is an experiential spirituality characterized by practices such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, and expressive worship (Orogun and Pillay, 2021). Later developments, including the charismatic movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the Word of Faith Movement further reinforced its emphasis on spiritual gifts, personal encounter, and prosperity teachings (Gooren, 2004; Pieterse and Smith, 2018). Consequently, Pentecostalism has expanded beyond a purely spiritual focus to incorporate themes of personal empowerment and socio-economic advancement, particularly in marginalized contexts.

African Pentecostalism is a diverse and contextually adaptive movement, expressed through forms such as Neo-Charismatic, Independent Pentecostal, and African Initiated Churches (Resane, 2022). While rooted in global traditions, it incorporates indigenous worldviews to address socio-economic challenges such as poverty, illness, and social transformation through spiritual frameworks

(Gooren, 2004; Orogun and Pillay, 2021). Scholars further conceptualize it as a hybrid phenomenon that blends global influences with local cultural systems, including communal values and kinship networks, enhancing its relevance (Kgatle, 2017; Nel, 2019). In Southern Africa, its growth is tied to historical inequalities, while in South Africa, expansion is driven by grassroots demand and transnational networks, particularly Nigerian-led churches (Resane, 2022; Kalu, 2008).

African Pentecostalism and Migrant Communities

African Pentecostal Churches play a central role in migrant communities by providing emotional, cultural, and practical support (Ambrosini *et al*., 2021; Derksen, 2021). They function as social hubs where migrants build networks, access information, and reconstruct identities. Often acting as informal welfare systems, they support diverse groups and facilitate labor market integration by sharing employment information and linking migrants to opportunities (Ambrosini *et al*., 2021; Thomas, 2023).

These churches also serve as 'trust brokers', fostering social ties and reliable information exchange, while religious leaders act as intermediaries offering both spiritual and socio-cultural guidance (Ambrosini, 2017; Zanfrini and Antonelli, 2020). In South Africa, migrant-led churches generate social capital and cohesion, functioning as 'world-making' institutions that provide networks and opportunities, particularly in hostile environments (Hankela *et al*., 2022; Katz, 2022). At the same time, they promote identity formation, resilience, and cultural continuity through shared practices and transnational linkages (Nyamnjoh, 2018; Gukurume, 2024). However, existing literature tends to prioritize identity and lived experience, with a limited focus on economic outcomes such as labor market participation.

Limits and Contradictions in Migrant Church Support

Despite these contributions, the role of African Pentecostal Churches in facilitating migrant integration is not uniformly positive. Existing studies highlight important limitations in their capacity to address migrants' structural and socio-economic challenges. For instance, Gyasi (2022) narrates that while the churches in Düsseldorf supported initial refugee reception, their reliance on informal and *ad hoc* welfare limited their ability to provide structured support in areas such as language, legal aid, housing, and employment, prompting migrants to adopt alternative coping strategies. Similarly, in South Africa, although churches offer spiritual and social support, they do not necessarily alleviate economic precarity, with migrants continuing to depend on informal and precarious livelihoods (Nyamnjoh, Hall and Cirolia, 2022).

South African scholarship further underscores institutional and contextual constraints shaping migrant church support. Studies point to challenges such as a dependence on transnational leadership and limited organizational autonomy, which may restrict churches' ability to respond effectively to local integration needs (White, 2021). In addition, theological and ecclesiological responses to migration have been criticised as fragmented and insufficiently holistic, failing to address the multidimensional realities of migrant livelihoods (Magezi and Megazi, 2018). These limitations are compounded by broader socio-political conditions, including xenophobia, economic inequality, and social exclusion, which shape both migrants' experiences and the capacity of churches to facilitate integration (Klaasen, 2024).

Taken together, these findings suggest that while African Pentecostal Churches provide important forms of social and spiritual support, their contribution to socio-economic integration remains uneven, context-dependent, and constrained by both internal organizational factors and external structural conditions. Hence, there is a need for research that examines African Pentecostal Churches as mediating institutions in migrants' socio-economic integration. This study addresses that gap by focusing on how religious networks generate tangible economic opportunities. It conceptualizes Pentecostal Churches not only as spaces of belonging but also as sites of resource mobilization, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of religion, social capital, and migrant integration.

Theoretical Framework: Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory provides a useful framework for analyzing how African Pentecostal communities facilitate the socio-economic integration of migrants in South Africa. Rooted in the work of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam, the theory conceptualizes social capital as the resources accessible to individuals

through their social networks and relationships (Portes, 1998; Coleman, 1988). Within migration contexts, this perspective is particularly useful for examining how interpersonal ties and community structures shape access to opportunities and support systems.

Bourdieu conceptualizes social capital as the actual and potential resources embedded within durable networks of mutual recognition and membership (cf. Portes, 1998). From this perspective, belonging to a network provides individuals with advantages that can be mobilized for social and economic gain. Coleman (1988), by contrast, emphasizes the functional aspects of social capital, highlighting how trust, norms, and obligations within social structures facilitate coordinated action, particularly within close-knit groups. Putnam (1994) extends this analysis to the community level, viewing social capital as comprising networks, shared norms, and trust that promote cooperation for mutual benefit. Despite these conceptual differences, all three scholars converge on the central premise that social relationships constitute valuable resources that influence both individual life chances and collective outcomes.

This study draws primarily on the contributions of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam because their perspectives provide complementary insights into the role of church-based networks in migrants' socio-economic integration. Bourdieu's emphasis on resource access through social networks is particularly useful for understanding how migrants utilize church connections for livelihood support (Bourdieu, 1986). Coleman's focus on trust, reciprocity, and social obligations helps to explain how support is generated and sustained within church communities (Coleman, 1988), while Putnam's emphasis on social cohesion and cooperation highlights the broader integrative role of religious networks (Putnam, 1994). Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing how African Pentecostal Churches facilitate migrants' access to social and economic resources. Although other scholars have expanded Social Capital Theory, this study focuses on these three foundational theorists because the concepts most relevant to the analysis, namely resource access, trust, reciprocity, and network-based support are rooted in their contributions.

A key strength of the theory lies in its distinction between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Bonding capital refers to strong ties within shared identity groups, providing emotional support, trust, and a sense of belonging. Bridging capital connects individuals across diverse social groups, enabling access to new information and opportunities. Linking capital extends these connections vertically to institutions and actors in positions of power, facilitating access to formal resources and services (Putnam *et al*., 2004). These dimensions are particularly relevant to this study because they capture how migrants access resources through church networks (Bourdieu), build relationships based on trust and reciprocity (Coleman), and develop broader forms of social cohesion and integration through participation in faith communities (Putnam).

Underlying these forms of capital are mechanisms of trust, reciprocity, and shared norms, which promote cooperation and sustain network-based support systems (Coleman, 1988; Ostrom, 1990). In migration contexts, such networks are particularly important in mitigating challenges of marginalization by providing access to employment information, housing, financial support, and social services (Galabuzi and Teelucksingh, 2010).

Within this context, African Pentecostal Churches can be understood as sites where bonding, bridging, and linking social capital intersect, fostering strong internal ties, facilitating access to broader opportunities, and connecting migrants to external resources such as employment and social services. However, these networks may also be constrained by exclusivity and an over-reliance on internal relationships, limiting broader integration (Baycan and Öner, 2023). Overall, Social Capital Theory provides a nuanced lens for analyzing both the enabling and constraining roles of church-based networks in migrants' socio-economic integration.

Methodology

This study uses a multiple case study design of five African Pentecostal Churches in Cape Town, a method suited to analyze complex social phenomena in real-life contexts (Hollweck, 2014). The churches were selected for their significant migrant membership and active support roles, with diverse congregations offering varied integration experiences. The multi-case approach enables comparative analysis, identifying both common patterns and contextual differences in how churches contribute to migrants' socio-economic integration. The table below summarizes the key characteristics of the

participating churches, including their locations, estimated membership sizes, and the percentage of African migrants in each congregation.

TABLE 1: Description of the Participating Churches

Church	Description of the Participating African Pentecostal Churches
Church A	This church is situated in Gugulethu, Cape Town. The church has a membership of approximately 250 congregants drawn from diverse national backgrounds, including South Africa, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Zimbabwe. African migrants constitute approximately 80% of the congregation, making the church a predominantly migrant faith community. The church provides both spiritual support and opportunities for social interaction, serving as an important space for community building among migrants and local residents.
Church B	Church B is situated in Parklands, Cape Town. With an estimated membership of 500 congregants, the church comprises individuals from diverse national backgrounds, including South Africa, Nigeria, Cameroon, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. African migrants make up approximately 65% of the congregation, reflecting the church's multicultural and transnational character.
Church C	Church C is located in Kensington, Cape Town. The church serves as a significant religious and social space for African migrants and has an estimated membership of approximately 85 congregants. Its membership is drawn from diverse national backgrounds, including Nigeria, Malawi, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa. African migrants constitute approximately 87.5% of the congregation, highlighting the church's predominantly transnational composition.
Church D	Church D is situated in Parow, Cape Town. The church has an estimated membership of 60 congregants representing diverse national backgrounds, including Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and South Africa. African migrants constitute approximately 60% of the congregation, reflecting the church's significant migrant presence and transnational character.
Church E	Church E is situated in Maitland, Cape Town. The church serves as an important religious and social space for African migrants and has an estimated membership of 90 congregants representing diverse national backgrounds, including Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and South Africa. African migrants constitute approximately 93% of the congregation.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants aged 20 to 64 years. The sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation when participants consistently reported similar accounts as no substantially new codes or themes emerged during analysis. At this stage, additional data collection was deemed unlikely to generate new insight.

The study participants originated from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Uganda and had migrated to South Africa primarily to pursue improved economic opportunities, higher education, and employment. At the time of the research, participants were engaged in various livelihood activities, including formal employment, academic studies, and self-employment. Their duration of residence in South Africa ranged from five to over 20 years, providing a diversity of migration and settlement experiences. The sample was gender balanced, consisting of 10 male and 10 female participants.

The interviews, conducted between January and March 2026, lasted 35 to 60 minutes and were held either face-to-face or online, based on the participants' preferences. All interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded with informed consent. The semi-structured format allowed participants to share in-depth experiences, while ensuring coverage of key themes, particularly their motivations for joining a specific church and the social and economic support received within these communities.

Participant observation was conducted during the two-month field work in Cape Town to complement and contextualize the interview data. The researcher undertook six observation sessions across the selected churches, attending Sunday services, cell group meetings, social gatherings, and church workshops. In two of the larger congregations, observations were undertaken during Sunday services to capture interactions among a larger number of congregants. Although no formal observation checklist was used, observations were guided by the study objectives, with particular attention to patterns of interaction, support networks, information exchange, and church activities related to migrants' socio-economic integration. Detailed field notes were recorded after each observation session, providing insights into congregational relationships, migrant support practices, and resource-sharing activities. In addition, observations made during the one-on-one interviews were documented in field notes, particularly participants' non-verbal expressions, emotional responses, and the passion with which they recounted their experiences. These observations provided additional contextual insights into the significance of migration, documentation, livelihoods, and church support in participants' lives. Field observations were limited to the period of the researcher's physical presence in Cape Town, as the final month of data collection was conducted virtually following departure from the field site.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with relevant knowledge and experience. Access was facilitated by church leaders, but participation remained voluntary, with participants contacting the researcher directly. The sample was diversified to include different roles (pastors, church workers, and lay members), as well as varied genders and national backgrounds.

Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). All interviews were transcribed, and the researcher carefully reviewed the transcripts to ensure accuracy and develop familiarity with the data. During this stage, the transcripts were cleaned and organized in preparation for analysis. The researcher then conducted initial coding to identify meaningful patterns and significant segments within the data. To support this process, AILYZE qualitative data analysis software was used to generate preliminary codes and suggest potential thematic patterns. These AI-generated codes were systematically compared with those developed by the researcher, and areas of convergence informed the refinement and strengthening of the coding framework. Through an iterative process of coding, comparison, and interpretation, related codes were grouped into broader categories and themes. The final themes included *the church as a community and family*, *pastoral leadership and empowerment*, and *the church as a protective sanctuary*. Although AILYZE assisted with code generation, theme development, and data organization, the final interpretation, refinement, and validation of themes remained the responsibility of the researcher. The analysis was grounded in close engagement with the interview transcripts and field notes to ensure that the findings accurately represented participants' experiences and perspectives.

To enhance credibility, the study employed triangulation by integrating interviews, observations, and secondary data, alongside prolonged field engagement to build rapport and deepen contextual understanding. Ethical guidelines from the University of Johannesburg Senate Research Committee were followed, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality through pseudonyms and anonymization. Data were securely stored in password-protected institutional systems and will be retained for five years before deletion.

The study acknowledges limitations related to its small sample size, which affects generalizability, and its focus on Cape Town, which may not capture experiences in other contexts. It also highlights the importance of researcher reflexivity, given the researcher's involvement in church activities, with field notes and self-reflection used to minimize bias and ensure rigorous analysis. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how African Pentecostal Churches function as diverse support systems for migrants facing socio-economic, legal, and cultural challenges in South Africa.

Data Analysis

Church as a Community and Family

The church is often conceptualized as a substitute for the biological family, offering migrants a sense of belonging, emotional support, and identity within a foreign context. Many migrants describe the church as their primary source of familial connection in the absence of local relatives or friends, effectively replacing traditional family structures. Notably, 18 participants identified the church as a

surrogate family, underscoring its significant emotional importance in their lives. This perception is reinforced by participants such as P17 and P4 who referred to the church as 'family' or a 'family away from home', highlighting its role in providing stability and continuity amidst displacement and uncertainty. Below are descriptions from some participants about what the church means to them:

> P1: '*So, the church becomes your family when you are homesick*'.
> P2: '*In church you really feel you have family*'.
> P10: '*The church makes me feel safe, loved, and belong; it's my home*'.
> P19: '*…a room where you can actually feel that you have a community...You get this safety...like you have family away from home*'.

These findings indicate that the church extends beyond an institutional role to function as a socially and spiritually grounded community that reduces loneliness and fosters trust, acceptance, and mutual care. As both 'community' and 'family', it provides a vital support system for migrants, creating strong bonding social capital through close relationships that, for many, exceed ties with biological families.

This result aligns with existing literature, which indicates that religious communities provide inclusive spaces for migrants to build supportive relationships and access both emotional and practical resources (Ambrosini *et al*., 2021; Otiso, 2020; Derksen, 2021; Thomas, 2023). The study reinforces these insights by demonstrating how such dynamics are reflected in the lived experiences of African migrants in Cape Town.

In addition, the findings reveal that networking within African Pentecostal Churches is largely informal and relational, rather than institutionalized. Participants consistently indicated that opportunities emerge through trust-based interactions and personal connections rather than structured church programs. As noted by P1, trust facilitates introductions and referrals, which are critical for accessing opportunities within the community. This view is corroborated by both P20 and P7, who emphasized that networking is not formally organized by the church but develops organically through ongoing interpersonal engagement.

> P1: '*They can introduce you like, say, "Take this person. I know this person", and there is that trust*'.

These results indicate that the church functions as a social environment that enables, rather than directly provides access to resources. This dynamic reflects the accumulation and mobilization of social capital through everyday interactions. In line with Social Capital Theory, trust operates as a key mechanism through which information, opportunities, and support are exchanged. Participants' reliance on personal endorsements further demonstrates that credibility and a relational standing within networks shape access to resources. This finding is consistent with Kinnear (2026) who observes that church-based networking typically emerges through informal and sustained interactions rather than formal obligation. However, participants' accounts also suggest that these processes are shaped by evolving social norms and internal dynamics, indicating that such networks are structured, albeit informally.

Taken together, these findings position the church as a key site for the development of bonding social capital, where strong communal ties foster trust, shared identity, and mutual support, facilitating both emotional security and practical assistance for migrants. However, the findings also reveal important complexities, as the central role of the church may limit engagement with wider society, creating relatively closed networks. This supports Awoyemi (2025) who argues that while religious communities strengthen internal cohesion, they can also reinforce social boundaries that restrict external interaction. Consequently, although bonding social capital provides essential support, it may constrain access to broader networks and opportunities if not complemented by efforts to promote wider social engagement.

Protective Sanctuary

The findings indicate that the church functions as a protective sanctuary that extends beyond merely fostering a sense of belonging; it provides a structured system of care, guidance, and personal support. The majority of participants (15) described the church as a shield against both external societal pressures and the internal challenges associated with migrant life. In this regard, the church creates a stable

environment in which migrants can find relief from experiences of marginalization, stress, and uncertainty. As P1 noted, involvement in the church helps to alleviate psychological strain by mitigating the effects of workplace stress and xenophobic experiences through the emotional support embedded within the community.

This protective role is enacted through deliberate practices that reflect a strong commitment to relational care. Pastoral oversight emerges as a central component, as illustrated by P12's account of providing both spiritual and personal support to vulnerable members, particularly single women. Such guidance is further reinforced through mentorship and pastoral visits, which participants identified as critical mechanisms for addressing loneliness and fostering stability. This form of practical cooperation aligns with a broader pastoral mission oriented towards safeguarding and guiding the church community. Selected excerpts from participants are presented below to illustrate these dynamics.

> P12: '*Those single girls are under my covering. I pray for them. I protect them. I care about them*'.
> P13: '*We ensure that members are not lonely...We visit them with uh pastoral visit*'.

These practices transform the church from a symbolic family into a tangible, supportive community characterized by care, recognition, and protection through meaningful relationships. They reflect an active commitment to members' wellbeing and social support. This aligns with Zanfrini and Antonelli (2020), who highlight the role of pastors as guides and safe spaces, addressing both spiritual and social needs while sustaining cultural continuity, particularly for migrants whose religious beliefs are closely linked to respect for religious authority.

In addition, the church is often regarded as a safe haven for migrants, offering protection from outside pressures and essential support during tough times. Participants frequently describe the church as a welcoming space that downplays ethnic, racial, and national differences in favor of a common spiritual identity. P1 mentioned that being part of the church helps to reduce internal stress. The church community is depicted as a purposeful, inclusive environment that bridges divides, contrasting sharply with the discrimination and fragmentation often experienced in a secular South African society. Some participants pointed out that the church plays a vital role in building a strong social network where earthly differences give way to a shared spiritual identity. P3 shared a compelling story, saying that the church is a place where racial barriers are overcome. Interracial marriages are highlighted as a positive aspect in various churches. This feeling of inclusion was also noted by P14. The church fosters this welcoming atmosphere; P5 confirmed that it is a place free from discrimination, encouraging interactions among people of different nationalities. A key belief among participants was that advocacy stems from a theological commitment to universal love and non-discrimination.

> P1: '*Some of them they don't feel even xenophobia, they don't feel stressed maybe at work. because you have that support already in church, it even reduces*'.
> P3: '*The only place I've seen a black and white live together without racism*'.
> P14: '*Even if out there, I might be secluded or excluded. In church, I'm included*'.
> P5: '*Church is a place where you don't discriminate*.'

This multi-faceted support system demonstrates that the church-as-family is not merely a metaphor but a lived reality of holistic care. This shared viewpoint frames the church as a sanctuary from societal xenophobia and a laboratory for building trust-based, cross-cultural relationships that the secular world fails to provide. The church family proves its authenticity by providing tangible, life-sustaining support. Within migrant contexts, the church functions both as a shield against external adversities such as discrimination and economic insecurity, and as a structured environment that fosters resilience through trust-based relationships. This finding aligns with Pratt (2024), who demonstrates that structured forms of pastoral care such as mentorship-oriented guidance, counseling, informal visitation, and relational check-ins function as important mechanisms for addressing loneliness and fostering stability. Through mechanisms such as pastoral care, mentorship, and communal support, churches establish some form of care that address the interconnected emotional and socio-economic needs of migrants.

Trust functions as a key form of social capital within the church, fostering emotional security, mutual support, and the exchange of practical assistance. It underpins members' reliance on one another

and on leadership, sustaining the church as a protective network and reinforcing bonding social capital through shared identities and experiences. However, trust is not automatic; it must be continuously nurtured through care and accountability, and can be weakened by exploitation or leadership failures, with potentially lasting negative consequences for relationships and individual wellbeing.

Faith as a Source of Resilience

A key part of the spiritual sanctuary is developing personal faith. The findings indicate that faith is an essential tool that helps migrants build resilience, maintain hope, and reframe their challenges. Many participants (12) described faith as an active and transformative resource that changes how they deal with the difficulties of migration. Instead of being a form of passive acceptance, faith is regarded as a mental and emotional shift that encourages persistence and effective coping. As P5 explained, being involved in church life significantly changes how one faces hardship, promoting a mindset of endurance and determination.

> P5: '*First of all, it's obvious that when you go to a different country, you have challenges. But the fact that you go to church, there's a different way you approach it. You don't give up...persistent and resilient*'.

This resilience is deeply anchored in a theology of hope, where today's challenges are regarded as temporary parts of a divine purpose. Participants often connected their faith to a future-focused mindset, trusting in divine timing and support. For example, P10 explained that faith gives strength and a reassurance that current struggles will not last forever. P14 described faith as 'my rock', highlighting its role in providing stability. Similarly, P3 indicated a deep understanding of this idea, expressing a sense of acceptance and trust that allows for emotional peace, even amid uncertainty.

> P10: '*My faith in God...gives me hope, makes me strong, knowing that nothing is permanent, I may not have today but tomorrow is a new day*'.
> P14: '*The faith is my rock...because of my faith...I was able to keep my mind focused, and I was able to continue believing and trusting*'.
> P3: '*I feel like I've come to rest...I'm of the mindset that God should do whatever he deems fit with me*'.

These accounts indicate that faith enables migrants to interpret and manage their sufferings in ways that support psychological and emotional wellbeing. Church involvement fosters resilience, endurance, and a sense of purpose by encouraging individuals to reframe challenges through spiritual guidance and social support (cf. Janas, 2023). However, this process is not uniform, as the development of resilience depends on individual effort, access to resources, and continuous learning and reflection.

The importance of faith is further highlighted by organized pastoral leadership and community practices that integrate spiritual support into daily life. Participants described church leaders as key figures in promoting resilience, offering care through prayer, visits, and personalized guidance (P15). Pastoral engagement is regarded as both spiritual and emotional healing, with P4 observing that messages from leaders can restore strength and counter negativity. These practices indicate that resilience is not just an individual quality but is also developed and sustained within a supportive religious community.

> P15: '*Uh we help them by doing all nights, visiting them, praying...it's not just a prayer, but you are...going to leave them with a blessing*'.
> P4: '*…use the pastor as a vessel to send a word that...will break every negativity...you come out again with life...you come out again with strength*'.

Faith operates as a multi-dimensional framework that integrates emotional, theological, and practical elements, fostering hope, perseverance, and informed decision-making. It encourages active engagement with socio-economic challenges, promoting autonomy despite structural constraints. This aligns with Pratt (2024) and Awoyemi (2025) who argue that African Pentecostal Churches provide holistic pastoral care through interventions such as counseling, mentorship, and crisis support. In this

context, faith not only offers comfort but also motivates proactive behavior, while culturally resonant practices such as receiving blessings in one's native language enhance a sense of fulfilment (Zanfrini and Antonelli, 2020). However, the findings also highlight the need to redefine pastoral care to better address the complexities of contemporary migrant experiences.

The data also indicate important differences in how resilience and agency are understood. While faith is still central for many participants, some stories point to other reasons based on everyday challenges, such as economic pressures, systemic inequality, and family responsibilities. For example, P9 shared how facing marginalization in the job market pushed him to seek additional qualifications as a way to empower himself. These views indicate that resilience in migrant communities is not solely rooted in faith; it also arises from a combination of spiritual beliefs and practical needs.

> P9: '*Being undervalued and underpaid directly prompted the drive to empower myself and pursue new qualifications*'.

This finding aligns with and extends existing literature on faith-based engagement by situating resilience within a broader social capital framework. While Koehrsen and Burchardt (2023) demonstrate that faith-based organizations are shaped by institutional and material pressures, the present study indicates that similar dynamics operate at the level of individual experience. Although faith remains central in fostering bonding social capital through emotional and spiritual support, participants' narratives revealed that resilience is equally shaped by secular realities such as economic pressure, systemic inequality, and family responsibility. Consequently, resilience emerges not as a purely faith-based outcome but as a product of the dynamic interplay between religious belonging and socio-economic constraints.

Pastoral Leadership and Empowerment

The findings indicate that pastoral leadership is a central and multifaceted force through which bonding social capital is cultivated within African Pentecostal Church communities. This is evident as many participants described pastors as playing a role that extends beyond spiritual teaching to include mentorship, practical support, and social help. This broader leadership approach integrates religious principles with everyday challenges, enabling congregants to develop the mindset and strategies they need to navigate the complexities of migrant life. As P12 pointed out, pastoral duties involve not only spiritual growth but also guidance on personal responsibilities and caring for one's family. P6 highlighted the church's role in fostering adaptive thinking and life skills.

> P12: '*The first job of a pastor is not just to preach to a man. It is to teach him how to be a man, and being a man means you can provide for your family. And also, you can, uh, lead your family spiritually*'.
> P6: '*The church...boosted my mindset. They also gave us different strategies in life for us to be able to navigate life as a man*'.

These accounts reflect a leadership model centered on individual empowerment through the development of both mental resilience and practical competencies necessary for sustained wellbeing.

A key dimension of this empowerment is the role of pastoral leadership in facilitating employment opportunities and strengthening social networks. In this regard, the processes of bonding, bridging, and to a lesser extent linking social capital are evident. Churches function as community hubs through which migrants access employment and essential services, often *via* trust-based relationships. Job referrals represent a critical form of support, illustrating how leadership actively contributes to migrants' socio-economic integration. Pastors frequently act as brokers, publicly mobilizing congregational resources and connecting members with individuals who possess access to employment opportunities, business networks, and other valuable resources. While formal connections between churches and external institutions are limited, these informal vertical connections constitute a form of linking social capital by providing migrants with access to resources beyond immediate social circles. As the excerpts below demonstrate, pastors and influential congregants often facilitate access to opportunities by linking members to better-positioned individuals within their networks.

> P11: '*When we announced it in the church, one of a member that grants a company...he decided to pick him up*'.
> P12: '*...the church works to connect them to those that are at least well placed in the church...where they can at least get some income…I've gotten many of them jobs…I give them computer lessons'*.
> P14: '*I help young students with how to draft their CVs and coaching individuals until they are able to get jobs*'.

These examples demonstrate that churches move beyond informal guidance by establishing platforms often initiated by pastoral leadership that support skills development, financial literacy, and employment readiness. The emphasis is clearly on economic empowerment and self-sufficiency, facilitated through relational rather than formalized institutional structures. Leadership plays a crucial role by connecting members, organizing support mechanisms, and delivering targeted interventions. This process reflects both bridging and linking social capital. Bridging social capital is evident in the connections established across diverse social networks that provide migrants with access to information and opportunities. Linking social capital, although less pronounced, emerges through the intermediary role of pastors and influential congregants who connect migrants to individuals occupying more advantaged social and economic positions. These connections enable access to resources and opportunities that would otherwise remain inaccessible, thereby facilitating migrants' socio-economic integration.

Pastoral leadership also plays an important role in assisting migrants to navigate structural challenges, particularly those related to legal documentation and labor market discrimination. This support includes the provision of information, referrals, and emotional encouragement. Legal status emerges as a primary barrier to integration, with churches serving as informal information centers where members access guidance on bureaucratic procedures. Pastors often refer congregants to external organizations, such as Scalabrini, for assistance with asylum processes and documentation, while also drawing on internal networks, including members working within the Department of Home Affairs, to provide practical advice.

These practices reflect a modest but important form of linking social capital. While churches do not generally maintain formal partnerships with external institutions, pastors often act as intermediaries, connecting migrants to organizations and individuals with access to institutional resources, legal expertise, and administrative support. Through these connections, migrants are able to navigate complex documentation processes and access resources that extend beyond their immediate church networks, as illustrated in the extracts below.

> P9: '*The biggest hindrances in South Africa is documentation*'.
> P11: '*Only one quarter have papers*'.
> P4: '*Information is another key thing...there's a lot of information we got while in church that truly helped us*'.
> P13: '*The church will help them to refer them to lawyers or to attorney that will help them facilitate and then ensure that they are legally uh stable in the country*'.

This bridging role highlights the church's dual function as both a spiritual institution and a socio-economic intermediary linking internal community support with external opportunities. This finding aligns with Cazarin's (2019) study on African Pentecostal diaspora churches, which demonstrates that, in contexts of economic hardship, churches often promote informal income-generating activities to facilitate integration. Pastoral leaders thus act as brokers of social capital, connecting migrants to resources, opportunities, and support systems (Cazarin and Cossa, 2017). However, pastors frequently face challenges in meeting the diverse expectations of congregants, particularly in relation to financial assistance, which is intensified among migrant populations facing acute socio-economic pressures.

Despite these strengths, the data reveal significant structural limitations that constrain the effectiveness of church-based empowerment. Some participants highlight the exclusion of migrants from formal mentorship or development programs, often due to legal or institutional barriers. As P16 explained, the absence of inclusive and structured initiatives creates gaps in access to empowerment resources, forcing migrants to rely heavily on informal and often inconsistent support systems.

> P16: '*We don't have mentorship programs for non-South Africans*'.

A considerable number of respondents (17) further noted the lack of formalized support structures, including long-term sponsorship schemes, systematic mentorship programs, and structured legal assistance. While churches provide immediate forms of support such as food, shelter, and financial aid, these interventions are largely reactive and lack sustained institutional backing. Legal support, in particular remains informal and dependent on peer advice rather than organized services. This limitation is significant given the complexity of the regulatory environment migrants must navigate, revealing a gap between a high demand for support and the limited institutional capacity of churches.

> P19: '*I don't think we do have that in our church. We preach faith to people...want people to be integrated through faith*'.
> P18: '*Not part of a formal, migrant-specific mission,* [calling it] *an area to be exploited*'.

Such structural gaps restrict opportunities for long-term development and reinforce short-term coping strategies rather than sustainable capacity-building. As Gyasi (2022) notes, legal and institutional barriers, particularly those associated with documentation limit migrants' access to formal opportunities and hinder their full participation in development processes. Although not intentional, the absence of structured mentorship within churches, combined with restrictive state systems, can reproduce inequalities in access to support.

Moreover, while churches are effective in providing internal support and fostering dignity, their interventions tend to remain inward-looking, with limited engagement in broader policy advocacy or structural transformation. This inward focus constrains the potential for transformative empowerment, as the systemic drivers of migrant marginalization remain largely unaddressed.

Additional challenges arise concerning the sustainability and consistency of support networks. Some pastors report that beneficiaries occasionally treat assistance as transactional, disengaging from the church once their immediate needs have been met. As noted by P12, such patterns create tension between the church's values of openness and the practical risks tied to providing resources.

> P12: '*Sad to say, people come to church faithfully, the minute I get them a job, they leave the church*'. Specific cases highlight this pattern: '*A Malawian man received R700 for a Professional Driving Permit, but never seen him again*'.

These dynamics can limit trust and reduce leaders' willingness to invest in long-term support, thereby weakening the relational foundations necessary for genuine empowerment. This contrasts with findings from Cornerstone Fellowship Church, where beneficiaries are more likely to remain engaged and transition into active contributors within the church community (Pratt, 2024).

A further challenge consistently identified by pastors is the lack of financial resources to meet the growing needs of both migrants and other vulnerable groups within the congregation. This resource constraint represents a persistent operational limitation affecting the scope and sustainability of church-based interventions.

Nonetheless, members frequently link church participation to economic opportunities. For instance, P10 secured employment through a referral from a fellow congregant. Churches also facilitate entrepreneurship and knowledge-sharing through initiatives such as business seminars (P13) and market-oriented activities (P6), underscoring the role of church networks in promoting not only social cohesion but also economic survival and growth.

> P10: '*My second job it was through a church member who referred me to that job*'.
> P13: '*…business seminars…that teach them, this is what you can do, providing knowledge for business creation*'.

Connecting members to employment opportunities beyond their immediate networks illustrate the role of bridging social capital in facilitating migrants' socio-economic integration. Some participants further suggest that migrants who are part of a church tend to integrate more quickly than those who are not affiliated with a church.

Overall, participants report a range of economic benefits, including employment access, entrepreneurial support, and skills development. These outcomes highlight the significant role of church-based social networks in enhancing migrants' economic resilience. This aligns with Gyasi (2022) who observes that church communities serve as spaces where members collectively address pressing issues such as xenophobia, unemployment, and social conflict, while fostering mutual support mechanisms.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that African Pentecostal Churches play a significant role in the socio-economic integration of African migrants in Cape Town by providing emotional support, fostering resilience, and facilitating access to resources through trust-based networks. These churches generate both bonding and bridging social capital, enabling migrants to navigate immediate challenges and access limited economic opportunities. In addition, a more limited form of linking social capital emerges through the intermediary role of pastors and influential congregants who connect migrants to external organizations, employers, and individuals with access to institutional resources and services.

Pastoral leadership is central to this process, offering spiritual guidance, mentorship, and informal pathways to employment, documentation assistance, and other forms of support. Through referrals, pastors often act as brokers between migrants and resource holders both within and beyond the church. However, these contributions remain largely informal and short-term, constrained by limited resources, a lack of structured programs, and an inward institutional focus. As a result, access to opportunities is often uneven and dependent on personal networks.

While church-based networks promote strong internal cohesion, they may also reinforce inequalities and limit engagement with the broader society, thereby constraining long-term integration. Overall, the findings highlight the dual nature of social capital within these churches: It facilitates immediate adaptation but does not consistently support sustained socio-economic mobility.

The study contributes to migration and religion scholarship by indicating that faith-based institutions act as important yet limited mediators of integration, underscoring the need for more structured and outward-oriented approaches to support long-term migrant inclusion. It also contributes to Social Capital Theory by highlighting the uneven operation of different forms of social capital within migrant faith communities. While bonding and bridging social capital are the dominant mechanisms through which migrants access support and opportunities, linking social capital remains relatively weak and informal. This suggests that although church-based networks are effective in facilitating immediate adaptation, limited institutional linkages may constrain long-term socio-economic mobility and broader societal integration.

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