


The price of the call

A missional reflection on the covenantal strain in the relationship between clergy and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa

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Abstract

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa's ministry is rooted in covenantal theology emphasizing mutual care. However, recent decades, particularly post-COVID-19, reveal escalating systemic strain, causing significant economic and emotional hardship for clergy families. This study integrates Kretzschmar's DECA1 framework with Osmer's four tasks of practical theology. This lens reveals how covenantal ideals, while acknowledging burdens, often mask institutional imbalances. Using autoethnography, drawing from convocation dialogues and pastoral experience, the research argues this covenantal strain is a critical missional issue, impeding the church's capacity for justice, care, and communal witness. It argues that covenantal strain is not only pastoral but missional, affecting the church's capacity to embody justice, care, and communal witness. Rather than offering solutions, the study invites the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to reimagine covenant as shared stewardship, addressing institutional realities, reimagining a holistic view of clergy wellbeing and being set free ministry, and fostering missional renewal.

Keywords: Missional covenant theology, Methodist Church of Southern Africa, ministerial households, ecclesial financial ethics, pastoral moral psychology, covenantal accountability, Ubuntu ecclesiology, autoethnographic theology, missional ethics, DECA framework

- 1 Kretzschmar's DECA method breaks down the process of ethical decision making into the following steps: Describe (Description of the situation or scenario and why it is a dilemma); Evaluate (Assessing the situation using deontological, teleological and virtue ethics as measuring tools); Consult (Engaging with those involved and affected); and Act (Proposal for a way forward)

1. Introduction

What if the sacred call to ministry invites burdens that covenantal language cannot ethically carry? What if the church's most trusted words conceal its most enduring silences? What if covenant becomes the pathway through which economic strain, emotional fatigue, and relational fragility enter clergy homes, not as institutional design but as personal devotion? What if language meant to bind us into care ends up sanctifying imbalance, asking those most vulnerable to absorb the heaviest costs in silence? These are not merely pastoral questions. They are missional questions that test whether the church's witness can remain credible when covenant conceals inequity.

These questions surfaced with great urgency at the 2024 *Ministerial Convocation*² of the Central District of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). About 70 ministers and probationer ministers from urban, rural, and township contexts described stipend uncertainty, disrupted family life, and vocational guilt as part and parcel of their experience of ministry. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa's *Book of Order* presents ministry as a covenantal relationship rooted in spiritual commitment, yet it notably withholds any enforceable guarantees regarding stipends or stationing (MCSA 2014:30). Jonathan Sacks (2014:89) writes covenant demands loyalty and faithfulness, a commitment to stand together in mutual responsibility and accountability even when costly. However, within this ecclesial landscape, that cost disproportionately burdens clergy families, who are left to carry fragility as a manifestation of faithfulness.

The theological paradox is stark. Biblical covenant intensifies mutual accountability and moral obligation (Brueggemann 2025). Yet ministers functioning within such a context often experience a profound sense of displaced responsibility (Osmer 2008). Institutional ideals are frequently recast as personal survival strategies. Clergy do not merely preach covenant. They embody its contradictions while navigating emotional resilience, economic instability and fragile relational trust on a daily basis (Doehring 2015). These burdens do not reside in official church documents. They are embedded in the intimate spaces of clergy households where families learn to desire less so that the institution may consistently ask for more (Fitzgibbon 2020). This dynamic extends into what Fitzgibbon (2020:17–18) terms the clericalization of the laity within clergy households, where spouses and children assume quasi-clerical roles, blurring vocational boundaries and deepening sacrifice. Such internalisation of institutional expectations contributes to psychological distress, identity loss, and emotional isolation, especially among clergy spouses (Luedtke & Sneed 2018).

Interdisciplinary perspectives clarify this moral terrain. Economic sociology notes that institutions stabilise themselves by displacing volatility onto those

2 The first author, Vusi Vilakati, facilitated a *District Ministerial Convocation* well-being dialogue referenced in this study, held under the leadership of Bishop Faith Whitby of the Central District, at Klerksdorp Methodist Church on 15 May 2024. Notes from this convocation inform key qualitative insights.

with limited agency (Granovetter 1985). Moral psychology explains how ethical boundaries blur for the sake of cohesion, allowing harm to stay hidden (Bandura 1999). Family systems theory suggests that anxiety migrates across generations, prompting children to internalise vocational fragility as normative (Priest 2021). Ubuntu affirms dignity and care, yet African feminist theology warns that communal ideals may silence those already burdened by expectation (Oduyoye 2001). Post-pandemic scholarship illustrates how churches valorise resilience while inadvertently recasting ministerial fragility as sacred endurance (Koenig 2020).

This study builds on Williams & Bentley (2016), which examined covenantal ethics within the MCSA through the lenses of duty, consequence, and character. Their work provided crucial ethical insight but did not extend into the socio-economic, psychological, or autoethnographic-theological domains where covenantal strain directly impacts ministerial families. We extend the inquiry by integrating the DECA framework and Osmer's fourfold pastoral framework as structured approaches to theological-ethical reflection (Kretzschmar 2011; Williams and Bentley 2016; Osmer 2008). These approaches guide the study through empirical description, interpretive understanding, normative ethical reflection, and practical response.

Methodologically, we combine theological-ethical reflection and interdisciplinary theory with autoethnography as theological praxis. Writing as clergy within this tradition, we speak from inside the tensions we examine. This insider position grants access to fragile graces and hidden burdens, while demanding ethical reflexivity (Van Stapele 2014). Following Ellis (2004) and Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), we treat lived experience not as anecdote but as authentic data, theologically resonant and ethically situated. They are textured critiques of covenant life and rendered through lived experiences in the mission field. Autoethnographic accounts in this study function as textured critiques of covenant life rendered through experience, not illustrations but forms of communal theology (Adams, Boylorn & Tillmann 2021:16).

This study does not aim at resolution. It offers a moral anatomy of covenant as lived economy and theology. It traces loyalty, vulnerability, and contested dignity across urban, rural, and racial lines. The emotional and economic vulnerability of clergy and their families remains a pressing concern in South African contexts (Modise 2023:144). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed fragile support systems and uneven pastoral care (Moodley & Hove 2023:2–3). For this reason, mission must be reimagined as proximate solidarity rather than distant proclamation, echoing calls for mission from the margins (Mpfu 2020:4). This article is not a liturgy of triumph. It is covenant's honest confession. It is an invitation to trace care, accountability, and missional renewal through lived experience.

2. The Moral and structural anatomy of covenant strain

The tensions traced in the introduction take concrete form in daily ministry. Here, covenant reveals itself not only as sacred bond but also as an intricate system for quietly allocating emotional, economic, and ethical burdens. This anatomy moves through theology, household economies, psychological patterns, domestic spaces, and communal ethics, all of which directly shape the church's missional witness. Each is held to the same unblinking moral light, refusing to let them find refuge in pious abstractions that weaken the church's participation in God's reconciling mission.

2.1 Covenant and contract: A dangerous moral elevation

Ministry in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is grounded in a theological tradition that refuses to reduce vocation to employment. Early Christian communities regarded ordination as covenantal entanglement, a sacred joining in God's work that elevated ministerial identity beyond the limitations of labour contracts (Ferguson 1996:306). John Wesley envisioned grace as "practical divinity," a theology embodied in trust, accountability, and spiritual formation. Wesley resisted contractual framings of ministry, instead cultivating a vocational ethos rooted in relational fidelity, communal promise, and shared moral accountability (Maddox 1994:67). The MCSA continues in this tradition. Its *Book of Order* explicitly rejects contractual paradigms and embeds ministry in a covenant sustained by spiritual conviction rather than legal enforcement (MCSA 2014:30). Jonathan Sacks (2014:251) further affirms this vision, noting that covenant binds participants in mutual risk, loyalty, and moral responsibility transcending legal boundaries.

Theological elevation, however, inadvertently increases vulnerability for those called into mission. A recent Annual Conference General Treasurer reports (2020-2022) bemoan a substantial increase in the number of circuits have struggled to pay or paid late stipend payments in the last five years, directly affecting clergy livelihoods (MCSA, 2023). When stipends fail or pastoral care breaks down, the very relational fabric covenant was meant to strengthen becomes unsettled (Church of England 2020). The DEWCOM (2004) report, "Stipends within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa" acknowledges this reality, noting that the covenantal model complicates financial accountability. At the 2024 *Ministerial Convocation*, a presbyter observed, "It's a covenant because when things go wrong the church cannot be sued". His words carried reverence, not critique. DEWCOM's (2004) report on stipends acknowledges that covenant complicates financial accountability, creating strain in the very spaces where mission is supposed to be embodied.

The language that affirms ministry also deepens wounds when institutional care collapses. As (Pally 2016:57–58) argues, where relations are prized but structural supports are absent, the vulnerable may be pressured to give more than they can afford, and this sacrifice may be mistaken for virtue. The use of the covenant concept within the MCSA, may serve both as spiritual ideal and a institutional

mechanism that regulates the relations between the minister and the church. It honours calling but can obscure power imbalances, consistent with findings in African ecclesiology where high-sacrifice rhetoric often masks unequal distributions of institutional risk (Katongole 2017:211). When accountability weakens, clergy are left to absorb the strain in ways that destabilise their households emotionally, financially, and relationally (Phiri & Nadar 2020:144). Schlesinger (2018:11–13) warns that unexamined sacrificial rhetoric may spiritualize suffering and delay reform. Ultimately, when covenant rhetoric conceals institutional neglect, it not only depletes clergy but also undermines the church's capacity to embody justice, care, and mutual responsibility as part of its mission.

2.2 Economic fragility and displaced risks

Amartya Sen (1999:87) argues that dignity depends on real capabilities, not on abstract promises disconnected from material supports. In the MCSA, ministers face delayed stipends, shrinking reserves, and rising costs that make covenant feel costly. Five years ago, a KwaZulu-Natal circuit postponed assessments to finish a roof, calling it a priority despite financial pressure. One presbyter shared how a congregant offered petrol money after a funeral, and he returned home to a child missing a school trip. His narration was framed in reverence rather than resistance, illustrating how deprivation is sanctified rather than interrogated. These stories echo a 2010 Conference resolution on "Circuit Financial Responsibilities," which noted that failure to meet assessment obligations directly jeopardises ministerial stipends and housing allowances (MCSA 2023:210). Here, covenant becomes both a theological vessel and an economic fault line, with direct consequences for the church's capacity to sustain its missional presence.

Institutions reward visible sacrifice with symbolic honour while neglecting to secure structural supports (Bourdieu 1993:183). Scott (1976:5) describes moral economy as a social ethic where communities transform scarcity into shared virtue, forging identity through collective deprivation. Sherman (2023) shows how hardship gains ethical value in fragile systems, masking structural neglect with moral affirmation. Schreyögg and Sydow (2010:3) note that outdated models persist through habitual governance, even when no longer just. In the MCSA, covenant dignifies endurance but systematically displaces institutional risk onto clergy households, undermining their capacity to participate in God's mission with dignity.

Khuzwayo (2020:5) notes that post-apartheid circuits still carry structural inequality. Sen's (1999) framework helps expose how ministers absorb institutional gaps through quiet resilience, turning devotion into the social capital that sustains fragile ecclesial economies. Their devotion is misrecognised as economic capital in a system that normalises inherited fragility. The Church of England (2020) document warns that covenant without reform permits neglect. Peega (2009) adds that when sacrifice is misnamed as virtue, imbalance is sustained. Covenant holds beauty, but when unexamined it holds both grace and harm.. When the economic strain of ministry erodes a minister's capacity to serve, the church's mission can potentially contract into survivalism rather than prophetic witness.

2.3 Psychological patterns and theological burnout

Spiritual vocations often link sanctity to endurance, building identity around patterns of silent endurance (Akin & Pace 2017:113). Emotional depletion can be mistaken for mature devotion, especially in cultures that treat fatigue as evidence of loyalty (Maslach & Leiter 2008:103). A minister at the Convocation admitted fearing that honest lament might be read as spiritual failure rather than a plea for care. This a wider ecclesial psychology that compromises mission by treating depletion as fidelity, noted that clergy often internalise the needs of the church at the expense of personal and familial well-being without formal safeguards (MCSA , 2023). Such internalisation trains ministers to accept institutional absence as sacred responsibility, equating silence with loyalty (Orton, Linde & Jonker 2020). Burnout is rarely dramatic. It unfolds gradually beneath liturgical language that spiritualises pain and delegitimises critique (Hydinger et al. 2024).

Clergy often absorb institutional anxiety, mistaking dysfunction for vocation and submission for faithfulness. Transference allows systemic strain to be projected onto ministers, who internalize it as personal duty (Arnaud 2012). In such cultures, critique is discouraged, and over-functioning is praised, turning exhaustion into moral capital (Gabriel 2016:218). Churches ritualize burnout through theological language that spiritualizes exhaustion and deflects attention from deeper institutional anxiety (Hydinger et al. 2024). Conference 2018 explicitly recommended structural reforms rather than relying on pastoral encouragement alone (MCSA, 2023). Psychoanalytic theory reveals how unconscious repetition sustains organizational inertia and masks emotional depletion (Sant'Anna 2024). Adaptive leadership insists these are not technical failures but crises that demand emotional honesty and structural reckoning (Heifetz & Linsky 2002:14). When covenant is deployed as compensation for absence, it mutates into a liturgy of containment, transforming fatigue into obedience and burnout into devotional currency, thereby undermining both ministry's integrity and the church's prophetic credibility.

2.4 Familial absorptions and covenant by extension

In clergy households, covenant often extends not through doctrine but through everyday gestures that absorb implicit forms of institutional neglect. Family systems research shows how vocational anxiety migrates into domestic space and settles on those most emotionally available (Kerr & Bowen 1988). A superintendent's wife said, "We do not teach our children to expect too much..." Her words trace how aspirations are softened to protect vocation. Sacrifices are not temporary, they are taught, rehearsed, and inherited across generations are institutionalised across generations, becoming tacitly missional yet silently corrosive (Ijzendoorn, Schuengel & Bakermans-Kranenburg 1999:230–232). Maternal-thinking (Ruddick 1995) reframes this restraint as relational loyalty, where silence functions as a liturgical act of protection, but also as a mechanism of institutional compliance (Freeks & Rheinbolt-Urbe 2025). Wepener (2021:5) calls it a ritual economy in which emotional labour preserves communal stories and buffers ecclesial fragility (Today 2025:6–7).

Ubuntu theology, though rich in dignity, risks being weaponised as moral surveillance, when households are praised more for enduring than flourishing (Maseno 2024). These homes carry more than emotional strain. They enact covenant through curated gestures that convert depletion into moral display. Emotional labour theory, as reframed by Hochschild, shows how families suppress rupture to preserve sacred image, turning composure into a communal ethic of dignity under pressure (Hochschild 2024:9). This emotional discipline becomes a liturgical performance, where silence signals strength, and weariness is mistaken for grace. The result is an enacted sacrament of restraint, which is sanctified in everyday rituals that hold the church together yet simultaneously eroding the very households that sustain mission.

2.5 Ubuntu, theological complicity, and holy silence

Ubuntu frames covenant as communal belonging, yet Anofuechi (2022:113) warns it can blur into conformity where speaking strain feels like betrayal. A clergy spouse whispered, “If I speak of the strain, I fear I am unravelling his call.” Palm (2019:21) describes such silence as survival, reverent language sheltering institutional fragility. Palm (2019) urges the church to confess complicity, and Thesnaar (2010) argues that lament must precede healing by naming discomfort without apology. Rawls (2003:3) reminds that justice depends on making dissent visible and safe. This dual reality was acknowledged in Conference Resolution 2008/12, which encouraged structured spaces for clergy to raise concerns without fear of reprisal (MCSA 2023:175).

In such contexts, even quiet dissent is interpreted as rebellion (Van der Walt 2020:15). Absent such honesty, covenant functions simultaneously as sanctuary and snare. If the church is to redeem covenant in genuinely missional terms, it must create spaces where lament is not perceived as betrayal but recognised as fidelity to the gospel. Prophetic lament strengthens the church’s witness to justice and reconciliation (Brueggemann 2025). Silence that sustains institutional fragility weakens mission, while honesty that names strain embodies the good news as lived missional practice (Moodley & Hove 2023).

3. Entangled responsibilities: A shared moral mirror

Covenant does not operate in isolation. It distributes burdens and benefits across ministers, families, congregations, and institutional structures, often shielded by sacred language. This section explores how moral performance, symbolic sacrifice, and theological restraint sustain covenant’s public beauty while concealing uneven costs. Mutual trust often masks structural evasion, forming a moral mirror where responsibility is deferred under the appearance of reverence. For a church committed to God’s mission, these hidden burdens matter because they shape how covenant either strengthens or weakens public witness in society.

3.1 Ministers' quiet complicity and moral economies

Ministers often stand at the centre of covenant's paradox. They voice its heaviest strains yet also quietly uphold its most fragile illusions. Implied in Peega's (2009:42) appraisal of ministerial trauma is the reality that clergy sometimes avoid deeper engagement with financial realities by using theological trust language, which can sidestep explicit conversations about stewardship, justice, and long-term survival of ministry. A minister at the 2024 Central District Convocation admitted withholding details of his child's medical struggles, fearing that exposing his family vulnerability might open them to undue scrutiny. This silence both reduced the likelihood of institutional obligation and preserved his own moral standing, weaving sacrifice into his vocational identity at the cost of real family struggles.

Bourdieu's (1993:183) sociology of capital illuminates this dynamic. By visibly enduring hardship, clergy accumulate symbolic and spiritual credit even as their economic footing grows unstable. This becomes acute in post-apartheid contexts where circuits serving historically Black communities still carry structural inequities (Khuzwayo 2024:6). A Conference Resolution 2009/18 addressed persistent stipend disparities between circuits, noting that historically Black congregations often remain structurally disadvantaged (MCSA 2023:189). Ministers internalise these asymmetries through theological schemas that sanctify quiet suffering and, in some cases, foster resentment toward counterparts in materially advantaged contexts. The result is a moral economy where covenant loyalty trades on silent hardship, sustaining both clergy self-understanding and institutional inertia. Here covenant's beauty becomes entangled with subtle complicities that delay systemic rebalancing. This weakens mission by consuming the energy meant for pastoral presence in communities, leaving clergy households depleted at the very point where society most needs the church's voice.

3.2 Congregational sacrifice, symbolic value, and moral theatre

Congregations also shape this delicate ecosystem by framing clergy deprivation as communal virtue. A society steward from one of the circuit around Johannesburg confessed that seeing a minister drive a battered car reassured them that simplicity was more virtuous than material pride. Such remarks echo Scott's (1976) moral economies, where shared scarcity forges identity by converting deprivation into collective honour. While the MCSA affirms simplicity as a spiritual value, its resolutions on clergy welfare explicitly acknowledge the impact of inadequate support on clergy wellbeing and cautions against implicitly encouraging ministerial poverty in the name of godliness (MCSA 2023:264). These performances can obscure underlying issues by presenting deprivation as commendable morality.

Ministers often carry visible strain as currency for communal trust, reinforcing the belief that hardship confirms divine calling. Bloom's (2019:13–17) research shows that financial and emotional stress in ministry is rarely personal alone; it stems from institutional cultures that romanticise scarcity and defer structural support, with effects that ripple through clergy families, compromising health,

stability, and relational integrity. Similarly, Rudolph and Landman (2019:1–3) reveal that churches frequently neglect pastoral well-being treating sacrifice as virtue while omitting structured support. This moral theatre frames suffering as proof of faithfulness, thereby deferring structural accountability. When poverty is sanctified as simplicity, the church risks staging a theatre of holiness rather than embodying good news. Mission loses credibility when it looks like endurance without transformation.

3.3 Character formation under institutional strain

The psychological toll is quiet but deep. Haidt's (2001:817) Social Intuitionist Model shows that moral judgments arise from intuition shaped by communal norms, not deliberate reasoning. Ministers internalise these norms, treating institutional fragility as spiritual testing. At a coffee session with colleagues, one spouse spoke about shelving career hopes "to support my spouse and be president of the women's organisation in the church," while another described a child struggling to form attachments after repeated relocations across the connexion on the basis of the theological principle of itinerancy. These stories reveal a hidden curriculum where sacrifice becomes instinctive, and dreams are quietly reshaped to protect vocational identity.

Burnout in ministry reaches beyond exhaustion. Maslach and Leiter (2008) identify it as the erosion of meaning when moral purpose disintegrates under chronic institutional strain. In South Africa, Mkhize (2024) surfaces a theological culture that valorises restraint, shaping ministers who absorb fragility as proof of devotion. Drawing from Vellema (2013) the church's tendency to aestheticize suffering detaches reconciliation from justice, positioning endurance as sacred performance. Meanwhile, Hyding et al. (2024) document how clergy wellbeing is destabilised by relational isolation and ambiguous systems, leaving many to internalise hardship as vocational identity. Within this framework, overextension becomes sanctified, and accountability deferred, forming a culture where quiet suffering is mistaken for integrity. A mission that shapes weary leaders into fragile saints cannot embody the resilient hope that South African communities long to encounter in the gospel.

3.4 Institutional and lay avoidance of deep accountability

One minister, remarked at a Synod lunch that the Connexion sometimes invokes covenantal trust while avoiding redistributive accountability, especially when it comes to supporting poor parts of the church. Adaptive leadership theory describes this as institutional avoidance, where technical gestures conceal deeper moral distortions (Heifetz & Linsky 2002:32). Neo-institutional theory explains how churches replicate sacred routines to sustain legitimacy, even when these perpetuate imbalance (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:150). Comparative polity reveals mirrored dilemmas. Presbyterian models decentralise governance but struggle to equalise resources. Episcopal systems concentrate authority yet risk bureaucratic inertia and slow reform (Judd 2025).

In the Connexion, this avoidance often appears through fundraisers cast as spiritual resilience rather than structural remedy. While successive Conference Resolutions (2015/24; 2019/17) have affirmed the Connexion's commitment to resource redistribution and "mutual accountability in financial stewardship," they remain aspirational and non-enforceable. Congregational discourse tends to sentimentalise covenant, privileging liturgical affirmation over financial confrontation. This ritualised trust obscures material pressures on ministers and congregations, warranting further empirical investigation. Avoiding contextual scrutiny may preserve covenantal rhetoric, but it hollows out mission. A church that cannot confront its own inequities struggles to speak credibly of justice to the world.

3.5 A Collective Ethical Mirror

Covenant ministry is not simply a site of individual overreach or structural shortfall. It reveals a complex moral ecology where ministers, families, congregations, and the denomination each hold fragments of complicity. Ministers cloak strain in sanctity to preserve calling. Congregations valorise modest stipends as spiritual discipline. Families accept deferred ambitions as loyalty. Institutions praise trust while sidestepping robust protections. Ubuntu promises mutual care yet can also become the community's theological hiding place, muffling dissent in reverent language. All in the process become casualties of language devoid of the true economics that echo beyond the Sunday liturgy of absolution. Sometimes you hear the truth of the financial scarcity packaged as requests on Sunday morning in the notices read by the society steward.

So, what happens here: duty is intensified, ends are blurred into spectacle, character is shaped by fragile scripts, accountability is quietly diffused. What emerges is not an indictment of one party but a collective indictment of all. Each has found subtle ways to keep covenant beautiful even when it strains households beyond just measure. This is covenant's haunting ambiguity. It asks whether shared silence is faithfulness or fear, and whether its deepest promises are truly mutual or quietly arranged to shelter the institution first. It is a question that remains our unfinished ethical wager. Mission here hangs in the balance: covenant will either become a wellspring of liberating witness or remain a mirror of sacrifice that protects the church's image while muting its prophetic call.

4. Cross-disciplinary and communal consultations without signposting

Covenantal strain is not singular in source or expression. It weaves through economics, psychology, ecclesial design, theology, and African communal ethics, often without signposting the toll it exacts. This section draws from cross-disciplinary frameworks to trace how trust, sacrifice, and silence are ritualised across systems. Each lens reveals a different grammar of avoidance, where fragility is often blessed as faithfulness, displacement clothed in holiness, and justice

postponed in the name of unity (Standing 2011:10). Missiology reminds us that mission is not only proclamation but also the formation of just communities (Bosch 1991:370). When covenantal strain is normalised, the church risks obscuring its vocation to embody justice in the household of God.

4.1 Economic and labour perspectives: precarity as sacred currency

Clergy precarity is global, systemic, and morally stylised. Institutions offload volatility onto mobile ministers while praising their spiritual availability, echoing Standing (2011:13) analysis of the precariat as a class made virtuous by its vulnerability. Itinerancy, on one end celebrated as apostolic flexibility, now mirrors the logic of contingent labour. As one minister reflected after his fifth relocation in a decade, “I am praised for obedience, but my children no longer know what home means” (Synod Convocation, 2024). Smith and Thompson’s (2024:16–17) critique of disguised managerial control gains new resonance here. Moral vocation obscures precarity so thoroughly that it garners emotional assent. Applied feminist labour theory shows this assent requires interpretive effort: Hochschild (2024:7–8) describes emotional labour as affective regulation, while Anderson (2023:178) identifies hermeneutic labour as the cognitive work of navigating ambiguity and sustaining coherence within asymmetrical relational environments. This labour is invisible yet essential, and because it is spiritualised, critique becomes sacrilege.

Sen (1999) reframes dignity as substantive freedom, the ability to plan healthcare, educate one’s children, remain rooted. Dube, Naidu and Reich (2022) affirm that dignity rests not just on wages but on autonomy and recognition. Covenant without permanence becomes sanctified exhaustion, cloaked in sacred language but shaped by economic fragility. Ministers shoulder unstable incomes while trust is invoked to justify delay and redistribution is deferred. In the MCSA, this strain has been tabled repeatedly, appearing in Conference Resolutions 2003/17, 2010/14, and 2020/33 which have consistently urged fair stipends, pension reform, and sustainable benefits as well as adequate housing security for itinerant ministers, with inadequate provision often undermining their livelihood in retirement (MCSA 2033: 198, 214-215). Sentiment displaces solidarity and families carry emotional costs in silence.

The repeated framing of itinerancy as divine obedience has acted as labour dispersal that denies rootedness, a sentiment that recurs across many denominations across the region and the world (Church of England 2020). Clergy absorb institutional strain through invisible interpretive labour while critique remains taboo. Scarcity is ritualised as faithfulness. Waiting becomes trust. Displacement becomes calling. Silence passes for obedience. Such economic fragility not only erodes the minister’s well-being but diminishes the church’s capacity for sustained mission. This is not covenant. It is choreography, and the gospel performs it without rest.

4.2 Sacramental displacement and ontological exposure: Reframing clergy family strain

Clergy households do not simply endure institutional anxiety; they embody its sacramental displacement. The family becomes the unsanctioned altar onto which ecclesial tensions are ritualistically projected. Recent pastoral scholarship recognises that sacred domestic space is destabilised by expectations of emotional containment, vocational mobility, and performative grace (Makena, Wambugu & Chiroma 2023). Rather than sanctuary, the clergy home often functions as ecclesial infrastructure - present to serve, absent in formal recognition.

This spatial and emotional precarity constitutes what Butler (2004) frames as ontological exposure—a vulnerable condition wherein relational identities are structured by the demands of theological performance. Trauma research confirms that systemic strain in ministry families does not merely affect behaviour but reshapes interiority, memory, and self-perception (Fitzgerald, London Johnson & Gallus 2020). Children internalise ecclesial volatility; spouses metabolise rupture as quiet sacrifice. Peega (2009) names this dynamic a crisis of pastoral care, where emotional labour is extracted without covenantal protection. These silences accumulate into theological grammar, where fragility becomes normative rhythm rather than rupture requiring repair. Missiological scholarship emphasises that the household of believers is itself a sign of mission Niemandt (2019). When clergy families become sites of fracture rather than sanctuary, the church's sacramental imagination is diminished.

4.3 Governance and institutional design: Trust as avoidance strategy

Church institutions rarely reform: they replicate. DiMaggio and Powell (1983:149) show that sacred organisations mimic familiar structures to maintain legitimacy, not to deliver justice. Covenant theology, stylised as uniqueness, too often shields managerial inertia. In the MCSA, some circuits have withheld benefits even while holding reserves (MCSA Yearbook, 2020), a practice consistent with Schreyögg and Sydow's (2010) notion of ritualised safety over adaptive honesty. Fundraising initiatives become a substitute for deep analysis of serious financial rallies and the need for regroup or rethink institutional direction (Heifetz & Linsky 2002:14), and trust transforms into tactic, less covenantal courage, more evasion. Spiritual overlays mask economic shortfalls. Governance becomes choreography.

Circuits in Black communities within the MCSA continue to absorb the deepest institutional pressures. Williams and Bentley (2020) trace these patterns to colonial residues in ordination and deployment systems. Mbembe (2019) describes such economic exclusion as apartheid's lingering logic. Resource centralisation in urban spaces, according to Melamed (2011), reflects whiteness's enduring material privilege. The logic of itinerancy, shaped without reparative architecture, rehearses spatial marginalisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). One superintendent from a rural circuit noted, "We are told to wait, but our churches are running on debt while city congregations grow reserves" (Synod Convocation, 2024).

Such testimonies show that deferred promises are paid for in silenced futures. Kritzing (2013:2) insists that missional integrity and a church committed to transformation and justice is tested in economic transparency and relational justice. Church governance that protects reserves while neglecting ministers corrodes the credibility of covenant and reduces mission to management.

4.4 Moral philosophy and theological courage: when suffering is sanitized

Moltmann (1993:56–57) cautions that suffering is easily spiritualised when theology lacks prophetic edge. Clergy hardship becomes romanticised as faithfulness, even as systems remain unchanged. Public theology insists that private anguish must be made visible and collective, pressing churches to move beyond soft reverence to structural reckoning (Gruchy 2005:224)

Rawls reminds us of that justice rests on making dissent visible and safe (Rawls 2003:3). When covenant is used to spiritualise silence, it deflects redistribution and recasts struggle as purity. A Connexional leader who praises resilience while avoiding financial reallocation is not redeeming suffering. He is ornamenting imbalance. Real redemption must risk structural confrontation, not merely sentiment. Bevans and Schroeder (2004:348) argue that mission cannot be reduced to witness of suffering but must become participation in transformation. A missional imagination that avoids confrontation leaves suffering unredeemed and silences prophetic courage.

4.5 African communal ethics: Ubuntu as velvet and flint

Ubuntu affirms that personhood is shaped in relationship. Metz calls it covenant's philosophical sibling, grounded in mutual dignity (Metz 2007:332–333). Yet Ubuntu, when misapplied, suppresses critique under the guise of harmony. As one clergy spouse confessed: "I keep my ache quiet, so the church does not look divided" (*Personal Conversation with Author 2*, 2024). That silence is then misread as communal health while concealing strain. That silence becomes mistaken for communal health, even as it conceals strain. Looking back reveals how generational pride often comes at the cost of truth, sustaining systems that resist accountability (Bediako 1997:13). Ubuntu indeed offers correctives but also risks justifying austerity disguised as virtue. A young minister noted, "Ubuntu was invoked to keep me silent, not to keep me whole" (*Synod Convocation*, 2024). Missional hermeneutics presses Ubuntu into solidarity and justice rather than passivity (Mashau & Kgatle 2019:5–6). In this light Ubuntu can become both velvet and flint - tender in belonging yet sharp against oppression.

5. Fragile grounds for shared care

This study has not sought to resolve covenant's contradictions. It has traced how covenant threads through financial pressure, domestic tension, softened ambition, and the quiet endurance of clergy families. Each section has pursued

honesty rather than easy redemption. The final concern is not whether covenant survives, but whether faith communities can risk a shared stewardship that transcends sentiment and embraces ethical responsibility. What follows is a pause beside unfinished hope, a theological reckoning that asks whether the missional church dares to bear one another's burdens in costly solidarity.

5.1 Sacred debts and private sacrifice

Covenant presses into daily decisions and often silent sacrifices. It shapes children's dreams, spouses' careers, and ministers' capacity for lament. Despite ongoing reports of stipend inequity and weak pension systems in the MCSA, structural reform remains slow (Khuzwayo 2020:4). Sen (1999:87) argues that justice must protect real freedom from foreseeable harm, yet church systems often transfer risk to clergy households while interpreting that transfer as spiritual trust. Graeber (2014:13–14) shows that sacred debt rituals can suppress challenge. Ubuntu, when disconnected from redistribution, can spiritualize struggle and obscure injustice (Metz 2007:336). Ministers internalize this strain. Jung (1981) describes how societies project anxiety into symbolic figures. Clergy absorb fears about scarcity and cohesion to preserve institutional narrative. Ahmed (2014:15) calls this emotional circulation an affective economy. The burden becomes unspoken but deeply felt.

5.2 Institutional inertia and protected patterns

Church governance favours continuity. DiMaggio and Powell (1983:151) show how organisations replicate familiar structures to protect legitimacy. The MCSA retains Connexional assessment models rooted in colonial-era property logic, even across spaces still divided by apartheid legacies (Khuzwayo 2020:6). Stewardship shifted from hospitality toward infrastructure maintenance (Scott 2003:44). Broader reform efforts, including the Church of England's care covenant proposal, reveal how spiritual vision struggles to inform financial systems (Church of England 2020). Graeber (2011:78) argues that sacred debt shields institutions from direct challenge. Tushman and O'Reilly (1996:24) add that organisations balance legacy and avoidance.

In the MCSA, circuits affirm covenantal language while safeguarding financial reserves. Ubuntu, misread as harmony, often blesses hesitation and conceals cost. Missional ecclesiology reminds us that the church exists not to preserve structures but to participate in God's liberating action in history (Bosch 1991:372). Where covenant secures assets but neglects households, the inertia of governance contradicts the very witness it seeks to protect

5.3 Ritual silence and ministerial containment

Ministers and congregations often maintain covenant through silence. Haidt (2020:816) suggests moral instincts lean toward loyalty and sanctity. Clergy teach their families how to manage hardship invisibly. Kerr and Bowen (1988:230) note that anxiety moves through family systems, shaping development and constraint.

Palm (2019:5) calls ritual silence a theological mechanism that stifles communal grief. Yoo, Park and Back (2025) show how identity is secured by displacing discomfort into chosen vessels. Praise for pastoral endurance sometimes protects institutions from confronting what that endurance costs. Covenant can performance where reverence displaces repair. Missional discernment requires communities to break such silence, for the good news cannot be enacted if suffering is hidden behind liturgy (Niemandt 2019).

5.4 Unequal burdens and communal blind spots

True stewardship reveals hard truths. Fennell (2011) argues that shared spaces demand shared cost. Ubuntu affirms mutual care but cannot sanctify imbalance (Metz 2007:334). Palm (2022:5) insists lament must lead to redesign. Bennett (2025:42) shows how clergy children carry unresolved tension. Longitudinal research confirms that these burdens replicate unless intentionally interrupted (Ijzendoorn et al. 2024:231). Still, covenant also shelters grace. Ministers recount gestures of protection from congregations—like the rural church that repaired its pastor’s roof before their own. Moltmann (1993:64) describes covenant as unfinished solidarity. Such fragile solidarity challenges churches to measure health by household stability rather than property preservation. This is not only an ethical demand but a missional one, since the credibility of the church’s witness depends on how it embodies shared cost (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:351).

5.5 Covenant between reckoning and repair

Covenant remains both scaffold and spectacle. It offers trust but often conceals who pays its price. Bennett (2025:61) and Peega (2009:33) document how clergy families absorb covenant’s hidden obligations. Rawls (2003:3) reminds us that justice requires transparency and shared risk. Graeber (2011:111) argues that debts lose coercive force only when forgiven or distributed. Ubuntu demands accountability, not quiet suffering masked as virtue. Willimon (2002:30–32) writes that ministry was never intended to be safe. But churches cannot celebrate covenant while clergy households quietly carry its cost. Structural equity must accompany liturgical reverence. Covenant’s future will depend on whether it is reclaimed as costly mutuality or left as a performance obscuring sacrifice. For the missional church, the reckoning lies not in doctrinal affirmation but in shared repair.

6. The price of the call

This study closes without procedural resolutions. The autoethnographic and interdisciplinary approach has been chosen to hold covenant’s theological, economic, psychological, and communal tensions without reducing them to managerial remedies. Following Moltmann’s vision of unfinished solidarity (1974:63), Palm’s insistence that lament must precede structural confession (2022:5), we let covenant stand as both fragile promise and unsettling mirror.

What follows is not a benediction but a final provocation, a missional summons that returns us to the questions that first drew us here.

What if covenant is not a fortress but a thin scaffold of trust, creaking under debts the liturgy will not name? What if we sanctify ministers' sacrifices to avoid sharing their risks, folding fragile families into hymns so the church's story stays pure? Covenant may be a test of how much grace we practice before it becomes mere performance. The real measure is not how clergy families handle hidden costs, but whether the missional church shares their burdens as part of its role in God's mission with urgency and responsibility.

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