

In Zimbabwe, churches are among the few places where the poor can access Wi-Fi

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In a sprawling township in Mutare, a border city in Zimbabwe, Laurence Moyo, 24, spends five hours each day resting his back on the wall of a gigantic church building that belongs to the United Baptist Church. He grasps a rusty Asus laptop and an old Samsung smartphone and is immersed in his own online world.

“Daily we poach the church’s Wi-Fi. It’s our gateway to the limitless digital world outside there,” Moyo explained.

In Zimbabwe, Baptist churches, Catholic cathedrals, Anglican or Lutheran seminaries are places where free, high-speed Wi-Fi is lavishly available around the clock because local churches are comparatively awash with money from tithes and foreign philanthropy charities in the U.S. and Europe.

Yet these church premises in Zimbabwe are islands of wealth in the sea of [impoverished](#) urban townships that dot the country. Immaculate church buildings in Zimbabwe are surrounded by thousands of homes where [jobless](#), highly educated youths live, youth who are desperate to connect to high-speed broadband internet and better themselves digitally.

‘It’s such a contrast: church premises are zones of high-speed Wi-Fi in a country where millions are so poor that their experience of the internet is simply cheap WhatsApp messaging and nothing more,” said Carter Mavhiza, an independent public economist in the capital Harare.

[The Alliance for Affordable Internet](#) says Zimbabwe is home to one of Africa’s most expensive broadband internet access. Few residents in this deeply Christian but impoverished country can afford to buy 1.4GB of data, which costs a whopping \$15, a figure that’s double AAI’s global benchmark of 2% of average monthly income.

This leaves hundreds of church premises across the country as unofficial Wi-Fi hotspots where internet-hungry township residents, especially digital-savvy Millennials, can hop on high-speed signals from Wi-Fi routers installed in church premises.

“We don’t invite the internet poachers or expel them,” said Pastor Ruda Moyo, a Baptist minister in Harare who is used to seeing a bevy of teenagers strolling around his church premises, tapping into Wi-Fi signals.

“They just show up with their old laptops and smartphones, stand against the church walls whilst we conduct our services — and they are busy poaching into our free Wi-Fi. Rarely do they show interest in church sermons, just free Wi-Fi. We know they are poor and hungry for any free internet connection.”

Zimbabwe’s youth, who are among the world’s highest victims of joblessness, desperately poach church Wi-Fi to do online assignments for students worldwide who can pay; to seek jobs abroad and escape the blighted country; to keep in touch with relatives in the U.S. or Europe who can send [remittances](#) for desperately needed medicine and food.

“It’s hard being young in Zimbabwe — educated but jobless yet hungry to connect to a whole internet world out there,” said Sylvester Kaneta, 24, who holds a bachelor of environmental science degree but says he never has found employment two years after graduation.



This Zimbabwean youth lives next door to a church, and the Wi-Fi signal is strong enough that he can capture it from home.

Sylvester walks a mile each day to the endowed Presbyterian church premises in his township to poach the free church Wi-Fi, teach a one-hour Skype mathematics class for 10 students in Johannesburg, South Africa — 1,000 miles away — for a weekly flat fee of \$10.

“At the end of each remote Skype math lesson which I teach via free church Wi-Fi, I desperately apply for water engineering jobs in Dubai and other Gulf Arab countries, hoping for any luck,” said Kaneta, whose ultimate hope, like thousands of other deprived Millennial Zimbabweans, is to [exit the country](#).

“We don’t put a password on our church premises Wi-Fi to lock out free riders who come to poach our signals,” said Taurai Makuza, a pastor at All Nations Faith Church in Bulawayo, the country’s second largest city.

In resource-poor countries like Zimbabwe, churches — which are also great humanitarians, supplanting some state roles — do have considerable wealth (from Western donations, tithes, tax-free investments). However, church premises often are surrounded by urban squalor and deprivation. The poor who live around church premises feel they have a moral justification to poach some trapping of the churches’ riches like broadband internet.

“Honestly churches are our last Wi-Fi zone hope because our Zimbabwe government refuses to roll out affordable or free basic broadband. Hotels, corporate offices, gas stations, shopping malls in Zimbabwe too are selfish and don’t host free Wi-Fi on their premises like they do in neighboring [South Africa](#),” explained Shylet Nezandonyi, 25, a Millennial in Mutare city who poaches Catholic premises Wi-Fi to research nursing jobs vacancies in England and hopefully [exit Zimbabwe](#).

Church ministers in Zimbabwe say ideally they would wish those who poach their free broadband internet would become converts and attend services, but it doesn’t always happen. Churches can’t expel the poor who are using their internet resources because that, too, would be morally insensitive.

“It’s the moral catch-22 situation of Zimbabwe churches,” said Deline Chikoshana, a theology lecturer at Rusitu Bible College, a Baptist training seminary in east Zimbabwe. “Expel free Wi-Fi poachers and violate Christ’s commandment to cater to the poor. Tolerate free Wi-Fi poachers on your cathedrals, and see your premises crowded by rowdy crowds totally uninterested in sermons.”

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