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The church and exemplary leadership in the 21st century

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Dates:

Received: 6 November, 2024

Accepted: 6 August, 2025

Published: 20 October, 2025

Disclaimer:

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Competing interests:

The author(s) declare that there are no financial or personal relationships that could have inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

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ABSTRACT

Exemplary leadership in the Church in the contemporary time is a major concern. Significance of exemplary leadership in the contemporary church is highlighted. The study aims to explore the Christian teaching on exemplary leadership, core exemplary leadership in the contemporary Church. The solutions to the problem of exemplary leadership are highlighted. The research methodology used in this study is phenomenological method. The study finds out that exemplary leaders possess a unique combination of traits, including emotional intelligence, spiritual maturity, and a strong sense of purpose. They are able to inspire and motivate their followers, foster a sense of community and belonging, and promote a culture of innovation and growth. The findings of this study have important implications for church leaders and organizations. They highlight the need for leaders to preserve servant leadership as a measure for transformational leadership skills, including their emotional intelligence, spiritual maturity, and ability to inspire and motivate others. By doing so, leaders can create a positive and productive work environment, foster a sense of community and belonging, and promote a culture of innovation and growth.

Keywords: Church, Exemplary, Leadership, Century

A. INTRODUCTION

Exemplary leadership within the Church is characterised by integrity, vision, adaptability, and the capacity to serve as a moral compass. Leaders are called to embody Christ-like qualities while simultaneously addressing the unique needs of their congregations. This dual role presents significant challenges, especially in an age marked by rapid globalization, secularism, and the proliferation of digital communication. Thus, understanding what constitutes exemplary leadership in this context is vital for sustaining the Church's relevance and effectiveness (Greenleaf, 1977). The contemporary Church operates within an environment shaped by diverse cultural expectations, economic disparities, and shifting values. Leaders are not only tasked with shepherding their congregations but also with engaging the broader community in ways that reflect the Gospel. This requires a balance between tradition and innovation, as well as the ability to foster unity amid diversity. According to Conger, Riggio and Jahnke (2019), exemplary leadership transcends administrative functions, focusing instead on servant leadership, discipleship, and the cultivation of spiritual maturity within the body of Christ.

The Church today faces a myriad of challenges that threaten its role as a spiritual and moral anchor in society. These include the decline in church attendance, waning trust in religious institutions, and the growing influence of secular ideologies. Compounding these issues are internal struggles such as leadership scandals, generational divides, and the lack of clear vision within some congregations. Amid these challenges, the need for exemplary leadership has never been more critical.

A key problem lies in the apparent disconnect between traditional models of leadership and the evolving expectations of modern congregations. While the Bible provides timeless principles for godly leadership, the application of these principles requires contextual adaptation to address contemporary realities (Marshall, 2004). Many church leaders struggle to bridge this gap, leading to disillusionment among followers and a diminished capacity to fulfil the Church's mission effectively. Therefore, the major thrust of this research is to examine.

The study used phenomenological method. Phenomenological method is a qualitative research approach that focuses on the subjective experiences and meanings of individuals or groups. It is a research method that seeks to understand the meaning and structure of conscious experience or perception (Hussel, 1913). Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that was developed by Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, in the early 20th century (Van Manen, 2014). Data were collected through secondary sources and were analysed qualitatively. The methodology is apt for this study because the issue of exemplary leadership is one of the experiences of the contemporary Church

B. CHRISTIAN TEACHING ON EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP

Exemplary leadership in Christian teaching is rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who exemplified servant leadership, humility, integrity, and a heart for others. According to Christian ethics, exemplary leadership encompasses the following below:

Servant Leadership

At the heart of Christian leadership is the concept of servant leadership, as exemplified by Jesus Christ. In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus teaches His disciples that true leadership is not about lording over others but about serving them. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:26-28, NIV). This teaching challenges leaders to view leadership as an opportunity to serve others, rather than a means to gain power or prestige (Welch, 2012).

Humility

Another key characteristic of exemplary Christian leadership is humility. In Philippians 2:3-4, Paul writes, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (NIV).

Integrity and Righteousness

Christian leaders are expected to lead with integrity, righteousness, and a commitment to God's truth. In Proverbs 4:25-27, the Bible encourages leaders to "Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways" (NIV). This teaching reminds Christian leaders to remain faithful to God's principles, avoiding the temptation to compromise their values for personal gain or worldly success (Welch, 2012).

Accountability

Lastly, Christian leaders are called to accountability. In Hebrews 13:17, leaders are reminded, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as those who must give an account" (NIV). Christian leadership involves understanding that leaders are not above reproach; they are accountable to God for their actions and decisions. This accountability ensures that leaders maintain a high standard of conduct, aligning their actions with biblical teachings.

C. EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP IN CHURCH

Exemplary leadership within the church is vital in fostering spiritual growth, community development, and organizational effectiveness. Church leaders, who may include pastors, priests, deacons, and lay leaders, are expected to model Christ-like behaviour, create an atmosphere of spiritual formation, and guide their congregations toward fulfilling the mission of the Church. Exemplary leadership is built on qualities such as humility, integrity, service, vision, and adaptability. This paper explores key aspects of exemplary church leadership, citing relevant scriptures and contemporary scholarly perspectives (Northouse, 2018).

Servant Leadership: The Core of Exemplary Church Leadership

One of the foundational principles of exemplary church leadership is *servant leadership*, a concept drawn from Jesus Christ's own example. In Mark 10:45, Jesus states, “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (NIV). This teaching reshapes traditional leadership concepts, emphasizing that true leaders serve others rather than seeking personal gain or power.

Church leaders are called to embody this principle by putting the needs of their congregation first and humbling themselves for the sake of others. In his seminal work on servant leadership, Greenleaf (1977) contends that leadership should not be about accumulating power, but about empowering others to achieve their full potential. Thus, leaders who exhibit humility, compassion, and a heart of service set a powerful example for their communities.

Integrity and Accountability: The Foundation of Trust

Exemplary leaders must also embody integrity and accountability. Integrity is crucial for maintaining trust, which is foundational for any leadership role, especially within the Church. The Apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of integrity in leadership in 1 Timothy 3:2-3, where he outlines the qualities of a church overseer, including being “above reproach” and “not violent but gentle.” The moral uprightness of a leader directly influences their ability to inspire and guide others.

Accountability ensures that leaders remain grounded and that their actions align with biblical teachings. According to Marshall (2004), ethical behaviour and transparency in leadership are essential to gaining the respect of congregants and maintaining a harmonious church environment. Church leaders are accountable not only to their congregation but also to God, which provides them with the moral framework for decision-making.

Adaptability: Leading Through Change and Challenges

Church leaders must also demonstrate adaptability, especially in times of crisis or transition. The Church, like any organization, is subject to change—whether it be shifts in cultural norms, demographic changes, or unexpected challenges. Adaptability enables leaders to navigate these changes effectively.

D. EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Exemplary leadership in the contemporary church involves navigating the complexities of modern society while remaining true to biblical principles. Church leaders today face the dual challenge of addressing spiritual needs while engaging with a diverse and evolving congregation. Key characteristics of exemplary leadership include servant leadership, vision, integrity, and adaptability, all of which are crucial in guiding the Church toward its mission in the modern world.

Servant Leadership: A Christ-Centred Model

Servant leadership, rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, remains foundational in contemporary church leadership. In Mark 10:45, Jesus models leadership by stating, *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve”* (NIV). This principle emphasizes that true leadership is about serving others, not seeking power or prestige. Church leaders must prioritize the needs of their congregants and lead with humility, creating a nurturing environment for spiritual growth. Greenleaf (1977) highlights that effective leaders empower others, enabling them to reach their potential and contribute meaningfully to the church community.

Visionary Leadership: Guiding the Church with Purpose

Contemporary church leaders must also possess a clear vision that aligns with the mission of the Church. Proverbs 29:18 asserts, *“Where there is no vision, the people perish”* (KJV), underscoring the importance of visionary leadership. In today's rapidly changing cultural landscape, church leaders must articulate a vision that connects with the diverse needs of their congregation, balancing tradition with innovation. Visionary leaders inspire their community to engage in ministry, outreach, and discipleship, fostering a sense of collective purpose (Welch, 2012). They are also instrumental in leading the Church through societal challenges while keeping the gospel message at the core of their mission.

Integrity and Accountability: Building Trust

Integrity remains a hallmark of exemplary leadership. Church leaders must uphold ethical standards and maintain accountability, as they are role models for their congregation. Paul's instructions to church leaders in 1 Timothy 3:2-3 highlight the importance of being *“above reproach”* and *“gentle”*. Leaders who maintain high ethical standards build trust and credibility within their community. Marshall (2004) notes that transparency and accountability ensure that leaders remain faithful to their responsibilities and are better equipped to handle the challenges of modern ministry, such as financial integrity and interpersonal relationships within the church.

Adaptability: Navigating Change in a Diverse World

The contemporary church must also be adaptable, especially in the face of shifting cultural norms, technological advancements, and changing demographics. Church leaders today must respond to these changes without compromising the gospel message. The Apostle Paul's approach to contextualizing the gospel in 1 Corinthians 9:22 demonstrates the need for adaptability in ministry. Leaders must embrace innovation, such as using digital platforms for worship and outreach, while remaining faithful to the core values of the Church. Leadership that is adaptable fosters a dynamic, responsive church that meets the needs of both current and future generations (Kouzes and Posner, 2012).

E. SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP

Exemplary leadership, while vital for family and societal progress, can face several challenges that hinder its effectiveness. Issues such as poor communication, lack of emotional intelligence, resistance to change, and burnout are common barriers. However, addressing these challenges through targeted strategies can enhance the impact of exemplary leadership.

One of the primary solutions is fostering open and transparent communication. Leaders who communicate clearly and listen actively can prevent misunderstandings and build trust within their teams or families. According to Hackman and Johnson (2013), effective communication not only clarifies expectations but also fosters an atmosphere of respect and inclusivity. Leaders who prioritize communication create environments where ideas and feedback flow freely, promoting collaboration and problem-solving.

Another solution is developing emotional intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence, which involves understanding and managing one's emotions while empathizing with others, is crucial for leadership success. Goleman (1998) argues that leaders with high EI are better equipped to handle conflict, motivate others, and make sound decisions under pressure. To improve EI, leaders can engage in regular self-reflection, empathy-building exercises, and conflict resolution training, ensuring they are responsive to the emotional needs of their teams.

Resistance to change is another obstacle to exemplary leadership, particularly in fast-evolving environments. Leaders can overcome this resistance by adopting a transformational leadership style that emphasizes motivation and vision over authority. Bass and Avolio (1994) suggest that transformational leaders inspire followers by articulating a compelling future and empowering them to contribute toward achieving it. Providing clear, consistent messaging and involving others in the decision-making process can help mitigate fear and foster adaptability.

Lastly, preventing burnout is essential for maintaining the effectiveness of exemplary leadership. Leaders often bear heavy emotional and physical burdens, which can lead to exhaustion and diminished performance. One solution is for leaders to model self-care practices, prioritize work-life balance, and delegate responsibilities. According to Maslach and Leiter (2016), organizations that support leaders in managing their workloads and provide avenues for stress relief can maintain a sustainable leadership culture, allowing leaders to be more effective in the long term.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges of exemplary leadership involves fostering communication, developing emotional intelligence, embracing change, and preventing burnout. These solutions not only strengthen leadership capabilities but also enhance the overall well-being and effectiveness of individuals and communities.

F. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, examining exemplary leadership in the contemporary church requires a balanced approach that combines spiritual integrity with practical leadership skills. Effective leaders must model ethical behaviour, communicate transparently, and cultivate emotional intelligence to address the diverse needs of their congregations. By embracing continuous learning and adapting to societal changes, church leaders can maintain relevance and effectiveness in guiding their communities. Ultimately, exemplary leadership within the church plays a vital role in fostering faith, unity, and social responsibility in the modern world.

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