

■ ARTICLE DE RECHERCHE / RESEARCH ARTICLE

Leadership Development and its Practical Response: The Case of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus-Central Synod

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Résumé

This dissertation investigated leadership development within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus Central Synod (EECMY-CS) with the aim of formulating a comprehensive and contextually grounded leadership model capable of addressing the multifaceted challenges the church faced. As one of the largest Lutheran denominations in Africa, the EECMY-CS had been navigating a period marked by significant internal and external transformations. Internally, changes in spiritual commitment, shifting generational expectations, and evolving patterns of congregational engagement highlighted the need for renewed leadership. Externally, broader societal pressures including increasing youth unemployment, growing political activism, and changing socio-economic conditions placed additional demands on the church's leadership practices. These realities required an approach to leadership development that was both rooted in biblical principles and responsive to contemporary circumstances. The study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative data obtained through questionnaires with qualitative insights gathered from focus group discussions and key informant interviews. These primary data sources were complemented by secondary analyses of theological and leadership literature. The findings revealed notable gaps in existing leadership practices, including minimal youth involvement, weak succession planning, limited technological integration, and insufficient engagement with socio-economic issues affecting church members. Furthermore, deficiencies were observed in spiritual integrity, mentorship culture, and administrative competence among current leaders. Based on these findings, the study proposed a leadership development framework that combined core biblical principles such as stewardship, servanthood, and spiritual maturity with contemporary leadership competencies, including strategic planning, communication, digital literacy, and community engagement. Central to the proposed model was the intentional empowerment of youth, the promotion of initiatives aimed at economic and social transformation, and the adoption of technology to improve ministry effectiveness and organizational efficiency. Overall, this dissertation contributed valuable insights to church leaders, theologians, and scholars of religious leadership. It advocated for a holistic and mission-driven approach to leadership development that fostered spiritual growth, enhanced institutional effectiveness, and strengthened the church's broader social responsibility. By adopting the proposed framework, the EECMY-CS would have been better positioned to sustain its mission and respond effectively to the rapidly changing contexts in which it operated.

Mots-clés : Leadership Development, Ethiopian Evangelical Church, Mekane Yesus, Spiritual Transformation, Community Engagement, Youth Leadership, Political Activism, Economic Transformation

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus–Central Synod (EECMY-CS), known as one of Africa's largest and most influential Lutheran denominations, has undergone remarkable growth since its establishment. This expansion reflects a dynamic and spiritually vibrant community, yet it also introduces new layers of complexity that require intentional and forward-looking leadership. As the church's membership increases, so does the need for leaders capable of navigating an evolving religious and socio-cultural landscape (Schifferdecker, 2014).

Historically, the EECMY-CS has served as both a spiritual sanctuary and a communal institution, providing guidance, moral grounding, and social support. Over the years, however, shifts in cultural identities, urbanization, and globalization have reshaped the expectations of its members. Traditional leadership systems once adequate for a more homogenous and predictable environment are now challenged by rapidly diversifying congregational needs (Tarfassa, 2012).

The church's hierarchical leadership structure, long considered a stabilizing force, is increasingly tested by calls for greater inclusivity, transparency, and participatory decision-making. Younger members, in particular, assert their desire for a church that not only honors its doctrinal heritage but also speaks to their contemporary convictions and life experiences. This generational shift pressures leaders to rethink their approaches to engagement and governance (Dunaetz & Cullum, 2019). Compounding these internal pressures are external socio-economic realities facing Ethiopia as a whole. Rising unemployment, persistent inflation, and widening economic disparities directly affect the lives of church members. These conditions have created heightened expectations for the church to respond not only spiritually but also practically. Without effective leadership that understands and addresses these contextual challenges, frustration and disillusionment can grow within the congregation (Holt et al., 2009).

Technological advancement adds an additional layer of complexity. Digital communication, social media networks, and online ministry tools provide unprecedented opportunities for outreach and connection. Yet, the uneven adoption of technology especially between older and younger generations creates a digital divide that church leaders must consciously bridge. Failure to do so risks

alienating segments of the congregation, particularly youth who live in a technology-integrated world (Selwyn, 2009).

These multifaceted developments highlight the necessity of a deliberate and comprehensive leadership development strategy within the EECMY-CS. Leaders must be trained not only in theological competence but also in soft skills such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, and cross-generational communication. Such holistic preparation enables leaders to guide their congregations more effectively amid changing circumstances (Fairholm, 2004).

A robust leadership development framework must also emphasize foundational values such as integrity, accountability, and strategic foresight. These core qualities shape leaders' ability to make sound decisions, communicate clearly, and cultivate an environment of mutual trust and respect. When leaders embody these principles, they strengthen the church's internal cohesion and its credibility within the broader community (Day & Halpin, 2001).

Crucially, the active engagement of youth must occupy a central place in leadership development efforts. Empowering young people through mentorship, leadership training, and inclusion in decision-making bodies ensures that the church remains relevant and vibrant. Youth participation not only contributes fresh perspectives but also secures the long-term sustainability of leadership within the Synod (Dugan et al., 2012).

Understanding these historical, social, economic, and technological dynamics allows the EECMY-CS to construct leadership models that are both contextually grounded and mission-driven. Leaders equipped with such contextual awareness are better positioned to respond effectively to the lived realities of their congregations and to guide the church with wisdom and foresight.

In sum, developing responsive and holistic leadership is essential for the continued growth and relevance of the EECMY-CS. By integrating its spiritual mandate with contemporary leadership competencies, the church can sustain its mission, strengthen community engagement, and navigate present and future challenges with confidence (McCallum & O'Connell, 2009).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

The recent body of leadership scholarship (2015 onward) continued to affirm leadership as a process of influencing individuals and groups toward shared objectives, while leadership development referred to intentional activities aimed at enhancing leaders' skills, character, and strategic abilities. Contemporary research sharpened the distinction between leader development focused on individual human capital and leadership development, which emphasizes social capital, networks, and collective capacity-building. Scholars such as Day and Dragoni (2015) highlighted that sustainable leadership systems rely on integrating both dimensions to support long-term organizational growth. Additionally, newer research emphasized "collective leadership" and "distributed leadership" as vital frameworks in complex institutions, including churches, where leadership influence is shared rather than concentrated (Friedrich et al., 2021).

2.2 Leadership Theories in Ministry Contexts

Modern leadership theories particularly transformational, servant, and social learning theories remain central to church contexts, but recent studies have expanded how these frameworks apply to faith-based institutions. Transformational leadership has been shown to enhance congregational engagement, innovation, and relational trust in religious settings (Muyambi & Kyobe, 2022). Likewise, servant leadership gained renewed attention after 2015 due to its alignment with biblical principles emphasizing humility, service, and community-building. Eva et al. (2019) noted that servant leadership is particularly effective in values-based organizations, where moral responsibility is a guiding force. These theoretical advancements supported the need for leadership development models that integrate classical leadership frameworks with the realities of contemporary ministry.

2.3 Biblical and Theological Foundations

Recent theological scholarship has continued to emphasize the biblical grounding of Christian leadership. Studies since 2015 acknowledge that figures such as Moses, Nehemiah, Paul, and Jesus model enduring principles relevant for contemporary leadership development, including integrity, sacrificial service, and mentoring. Wright (2018) argued that biblical leadership must be framed not only as functional guidance but as spiritual formation that shapes leaders' character and aligns them with God's mission. Newer theological reflections stressed that spiritual maturity remains indispensable for both clergy and lay leaders, reinforcing the idea that leadership formation begins with inner

transformation before expanding into organizational responsibilities (Hawkins, 2020).

2.4 Empirical Studies in Organizational and Church Leadership

Empirical research from 2015 onward has reinforced the importance of structured leadership development programs within both secular and faith-based organizations. Studies highlight that mentoring, coaching, reflective practice, and continuous education significantly strengthen leadership effectiveness (Ely et al., 2019). In church contexts, research showed that leadership capacity weakens without deliberate succession planning, intentional youth engagement, and opportunities for experiential learning. For example, Osei-Tutu and Amenga-Etego (2019) found that African churches often struggle with leadership gaps due to inadequate mentoring and generational transitions.

2.5 Leadership Development in African Church Contexts

Recent African church leadership studies (2015–2025) reveal systemic challenges such as leadership centralization, unclear governance structures, limited pastoral training, and insufficient engagement with societal issues. Nkomo and Kriek (2021) observed that African religious institutions frequently face complex intersections of socio-economic pressures and cultural expectations, which complicate leadership demands. Research on Pentecostal and mainline churches across East Africa highlighted that leadership effectiveness improves when leaders receive training in administration, conflict resolution, and community outreach (Mugambi, 2020). These findings parallel challenges faced within the EECMY-CS.

2.6 Youth Leadership and Generational Shifts

Youth leadership has emerged as a central theme in leadership studies since 2015. Scholars noted that churches risk losing relevance without meaningful youth inclusion. Dempsey and Brousseau (2022) argued that young adults expect transparency, participation, and digital engagement from religious institutions. Studies in African churches indicated that youth engagement improves organizational vitality, innovation, and long-term sustainability when churches create pathways for leadership involvement, mentorship, and shared decision-making (Chisale, 2020). These findings echo concerns about generational gaps within the EECMY-CS.

2.7 Technology and Digital Ministry

Technological change has significantly shaped leadership practice across all sectors, including churches. Post-2015 studies highlighted how digital tools social media, virtual communication platforms, and online discipleship programs transform community engagement and ministry outreach. Campbell (2020) observed that digital ministry requires leaders to adopt new competencies, including media literacy and online pastoral care skills. Research during and after the COVID-19 pandemic underscored that churches with tech-capable leaders maintained stronger congregational cohesion and expanded their reach (VanderWeele, 2021). The digital divide, however, remained a persistent challenge in developing contexts.

2.8 Leadership Challenges in the Ethiopian Context

Although research on Ethiopian church leadership remains limited, available studies since 2015 point to recurring challenges such as inadequate leadership training, limited organizational structures, and poor resource allocation. Deressa (2018) highlighted weaknesses in leadership formation within Ethiopian Protestant churches, including insufficient theological education and weak mentorship systems. Other Ethiopian studies found that socio-economic hardships, political transitions, and cultural shifts have complicated leadership responsibilities, demanding leaders who are spiritually mature and organizationally skilled (Gudina, 2017).

2.9 Conceptual Framework Emerging from Literature (2015–2025)

Synthesis of recent leadership literature supports a multidimensional conceptual framework for leadership development in the EECMY-CS. This framework integrates spiritual formation, organizational competence, technological adaptation, community engagement, and socio-economic awareness. Studies by Osland et al. (2020) emphasized that modern leadership requires cultural intelligence, adaptability, and moral grounding qualities essential for leaders navigating complex church environments. This theoretical synthesis provides a strong foundation for developing a holistic leadership development model.

2.10 Gap in Literature and Need for Contextual Leadership Model

Despite abundant global research since 2015, there remains a significant gap in localized leadership studies for Ethiopian Protestant churches, especially concerning the EECMY-CS. Existing literature rarely addresses the

unique historical, social, and cultural dynamics shaping leadership within this denomination. This lack of contextual research underscores the need for a tailored leadership development framework that aligns biblical convictions with contemporary leadership practices. Thus, the present study addresses a critical gap by proposing a model suited specifically to the EECMY-CS.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the complexities of leadership development within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus-Central Synod. The combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods allows for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by church leaders and the practical responses required to address them.

Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys administered to 330 church members across various parishes. These surveys aimed to assess demographic characteristics, leadership experiences, and perceptions of leadership effectiveness within the church. The use of a large sample size enhances the reliability of the findings, providing a broad perspective on the issues at hand. Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with church leaders. This approach allowed for a more nuanced exploration of the challenges and opportunities in leadership development. By engaging directly with leaders, the study captured their insights, experiences, and suggestions for improving leadership practices within the church.

The participants in the study were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that those involved had relevant experience and knowledge of the church's leadership landscape. This method facilitated the collection of rich, detailed information that could inform the study's conclusions and recommendations.

Data analysis involved both statistical methods for the quantitative data and thematic analysis for the qualitative data. The quantitative results were analyzed using descriptive statistics, which provided a clear overview of the respondents' demographics and perceptions. The qualitative data were coded to identify recurring themes and patterns, allowing for a deeper understanding of the issues discussed. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of their confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from

all participants, ensuring that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

The study's design also included a pre-test of the survey instrument to assess its validity and reliability. This pilot test involved a small group of church members who provided feedback on the clarity and relevance of the questions. Adjustments were made based on their input, enhancing the overall quality of the data collection tool.

Field research was conducted over several months, allowing for thorough engagement with participants and a comprehensive understanding of the church's leadership dynamics. The extended timeframe also facilitated the collection of diverse perspectives, enriching the study's findings. In summary, the mixed-methods approach adopted in this study provided valuable insights into the leadership development practices within the EECMY-CS. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the research effectively highlighted the challenges faced by church leaders and the practical responses necessary for effective leadership transformation.

4. STUDY FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal several critical challenges and opportunities for leadership development within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus-Central Synod. These findings are categorized into key themes, including spiritual transformation, youth engagement, economic factors, and the impact of technology.

4.1 Spiritual Transformation

One of the most pressing concerns identified in the study is the spiritual transformation of church leadership. Respondents reported a significant lack of integrity, devotion, and sanctity among leaders. This deficiency undermines the spiritual growth of the congregation and contributes to a sense of disconnection between leaders and members.

Many church leaders struggle with the demands of spiritual leadership, often prioritizing administrative tasks over spiritual nurturing. As a result, members feel that their spiritual needs are not being met, leading to decreased engagement and participation in church activities.

The need for leaders to embody strong spiritual values is paramount for fostering a healthy church environment. Leaders must be equipped with the tools and training to

guide their congregations in spiritual matters, ensuring that their actions align with biblical teachings and principles.

4.2 Youth Engagement

Youth engagement emerged as another critical theme in the findings. Many young church members expressed feelings of alienation from church leadership, citing a disconnect between their needs and the church's traditional practices. This gap has resulted in decreased participation and a lack of emerging leaders within the church.

The study highlights the importance of creating mentorship programs that empower youth to take on leadership roles. By involving young people in decision-making processes and providing them with opportunities for leadership development, the church can bridge the generational gap and foster a sense of belonging among its youth. Additionally, church leaders must adapt their approaches to meet the expectations of younger members, who often seek more dynamic and inclusive environments. This involves being open to new ideas and practices that resonate with the younger generation while remaining true to the church's core values.

4.3 Economic Factors

Economic challenges, including high unemployment and inflation, significantly impact the church's ability to meet its members' needs. Many respondents reported feeling frustrated with the church's lack of engagement in addressing these socio-economic issues.

The church's leadership must recognize the importance of economic transformation as part of its mission. By developing strategies that address unemployment and economic disparities, leaders can better serve their congregations and foster community resilience.

Furthermore, the church can play a vital role in advocating for economic justice and supporting initiatives that promote economic empowerment among its members. This engagement not only benefits individuals but also strengthens the church's overall impact on the community.

4.4 Technological Influence

The rise of digital technology presents both challenges and opportunities for church leadership. While technology can enhance communication and engagement, many church leaders lack the skills to effectively utilize these tools. This technological gap can lead to miscommunication and feelings of alienation among younger members who are

more accustomed to digital interactions. To address this issue, church leaders must develop their own technological competencies and provide training for members on the effective use of digital platforms. The study underscores the need for a strategic approach to technology use within the church. By leveraging digital tools for outreach, education, and community building, leaders can enhance engagement and create a more connected church community.

4.5 Leadership Practices

The findings also indicate several areas for improvement in leadership practices. Key challenges include the lack of effective consensus building, goal setting, and delegation among leaders. These deficiencies can hinder the church's ability to respond effectively to its members' needs. Church leaders must prioritize developing these essential skills to foster a more collaborative and effective leadership culture. This involves creating training programs that focus on communication, strategic planning, and team-building to enhance overall leadership effectiveness.

Moreover, the church should establish clear expectations for leadership behavior and accountability. By fostering a culture of transparency and trust, leaders can create an environment in which members feel valued and engaged.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study highlighted the urgent need for a comprehensive leadership development framework within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus–Central Synod (EECMY-CS). Such a framework needed to be holistic, addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by church leaders while providing practical, mission-aligned solutions. Strengthening leadership capacity in this context required both spiritual renewal and strategic interventions that responded to the evolving needs of the congregation and the wider community. One of the most pressing issues identified was the lack of spiritual integrity among leaders, which significantly hindered effective leadership development.

To overcome this, the church was advised to invest in targeted training programs that emphasized spiritual transformation, moral accountability, and ethical leadership. Leaders who embodied strong spiritual values served as role models, fostering trust and inspiring greater engagement within the congregation. The study also revealed the importance of youth engagement as a

cornerstone for the church's long-term sustainability. By creating mentorship programs and actively involving young people in decision-making processes, the EECMY-CS was able to bridge generational divides and cultivate a pipeline of capable leaders. This approach not only prepared the next generation for leadership but also ensured that the church remained relevant in addressing contemporary challenges.

Economic empowerment emerged as another critical area for leadership action. Many church members faced economic hardships that limited their participation in church life. Leaders addressed this by initiating programs that offered financial literacy education, vocational training, and support for entrepreneurial ventures. Such efforts strengthened the socio-economic resilience of the congregation, enabling members to contribute more effectively to the church's mission and community development. The integration of technology into church activities also presented both opportunities and challenges.

Effective use of digital tools required leaders to develop their own technological competencies while providing training for members. Strategic planning in this area ensured that technology enhanced engagement, facilitated communication, and strengthened the church's outreach in a rapidly digitizing world. Finally, improving leadership practices remained central to the church's organizational effectiveness. The study pointed to the need for skills in consensus building, goal setting, and delegation. By fostering a leadership culture grounded in collaboration and shared responsibility, the EECMY-CS enhanced its governance structures and better fulfilled its spiritual and social mandate.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the leadership development needs within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus–Central Synod (EECMY-CS), focusing on challenges, opportunities, and strategies for building effective, mission-driven leadership. The findings revealed that leadership development was not only a structural necessity but also a spiritual imperative for sustaining the church's mission in a rapidly changing social, economic, and technological environment. The research demonstrated that a lack of spiritual integrity among leaders posed significant barriers to effective leadership. Strengthening moral accountability, ethical decision-making, and spiritual formation emerged as critical priorities for fostering trust and inspiring

congregational engagement. Furthermore, youth engagement was identified as a vital strategy for ensuring the church's continuity and relevance. Structured mentorship, leadership training, and active involvement of young people in governance offered pathways for bridging generational gaps and cultivating future leaders. Economic empowerment was also found to be essential for enhancing the church's capacity to serve its members and community. Addressing financial challenges through vocational training, entrepreneurial support, and financial literacy initiatives not only improved members' well-being but also reinforced the church's social impact. Similarly, the integration of technology was recognized as a transformative tool for expanding outreach, enhancing communication, and improving internal operations provided that leaders received adequate training and strategic guidance for its effective use. Finally, the study underscored the need for improving leadership practices, particularly in consensus building, goal setting, and delegation. A collaborative and transparent leadership culture was seen as central to enhancing organizational effectiveness and fulfilling the church's spiritual and social mandate. By adopting a comprehensive and context-sensitive leadership development framework, the EECMY-CS can strengthen its leadership capacity, respond effectively to contemporary challenges, and advance its mission in a sustainable manner. In conclusion, enhancing leadership development within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus-Central Synod is essential for addressing contemporary challenges and fostering a vibrant church community. The proposed strategies aim to create a more inclusive and responsive leadership culture that aligns with the spiritual and practical needs of its members. By investing in leadership development, the church can ensure its growth and relevance in an ever-changing context.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several strategic recommendations are proposed to strengthen leadership development and its practical application within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus-Central Synod (EECMY-CS).

- The EECMY-CS should develop and institutionalize a structured leadership development model that addresses spiritual, administrative, and community engagement skills. This framework should be implemented across all tiers of the church Synod,

parishes, congregations, and outreach areas and should be reviewed regularly to ensure relevance and effectiveness.

- Regular training and workshops should be organized to cultivate leaders with strong spiritual integrity and ethical values. This should include mentorship from senior leaders, accountability mechanisms, and continuous discipleship programs to ensure leaders model biblical principles in their service.
- The church should actively involve young members in leadership roles through mentorship schemes, leadership training camps, and participation in decision-making bodies. Creating youth advisory councils can also provide platforms for their voices to be heard and integrated into church planning.
- To address economic challenges among members, the church should develop initiatives such as vocational skills training, entrepreneurship workshops, microfinance programs, and financial literacy seminars. Partnerships with NGOs, government agencies, and private sector actors could enhance the scope and sustainability of these programs.
- The church should invest in digital infrastructure and provide targeted training for leaders and members on the effective use of technology for ministry, communication, and administration. This includes using social media responsibly, implementing church management software, and livestreaming services to reach wider audiences.
- Regular capacity-building programs should be organized to enhance skills in consensus building, delegation, goal setting, conflict resolution, and collaborative decision-making. Encouraging open communication and mutual respect will foster a healthy organizational culture.
- Leadership development units should be established at Synod, parish, and congregation levels, equipped with qualified personnel, adequate budgets, and clear mandates to plan, implement, and monitor leadership initiatives.
- Leadership development programs should incorporate periodic evaluation to measure progress and identify areas for improvement. Lessons learned should be documented and shared across the church structure to replicate successful practices.

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