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## BRINGING LEADERSHIP TO CHRIST'S TABLE: TOWARDS A CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION FOR THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

**Background and Aim:** Christian leadership scholarship in Africa has largely responded to the continent's leadership crisis by adding Christ to existing secular leadership theories, exemplified by Huizinga's proposal to "bring Christ to the leadership table." This leaves Christ as a guest within paradigms set by human theory. This article argues that leadership should be brought to the table of Christ, where His lordship defines and reforms what leadership is. **Materials and Methods:** The article uses a contextual theological method, integrating scriptural exegesis (John 13:1–17; Matthew 20:25–28; Philippians 2:5–11) with servant leadership scholarship and African theology, notably Bediako and Ubuntu thought, structured through Osmer's four-task practical theology framework. **Results:** Three commitments constitute a contextual theology of leadership: scriptural grounding, normed by Christ's example rather than secular success; cultural critique, affirming and correcting African and Western leadership patterns alike under Christ; and missional orientation, directing leadership toward God's reconciling work rather than institutional survival. This kenotic model is distinguished from secular servant leadership: the latter is justified by organisational outcomes, while Christ's model is grounded in self-emptying love (Philippians 2:5–11) as a non-negotiable ethic. Five practical implications follow, spanning servanthood, governance, inclusion, missional witness, and crisis leadership. **Conclusion:** Leadership formed at Christ's table becomes cruciform, contextual, and missional, equipping African and global churches with humility, justice, and service. As a constructive theological framework, it invites future empirical testing against lived cases of African church leadership.

**Keywords:** servant leadership; contextual theology; ecclesiology; Christ-centred leadership; African theology; kenosis; Ubuntu

## INTRODUCTION

Africa stands in urgent need of leaders for both church and society, given the numerous problems confronting the continent (Ayandokun, 2021). The continent requires leaders in the church who will serve the people and lead with integrity (Igbari, 2021). The current call for rethinking leadership in church and society, prompted by successive leadership crises, implies that churches should adopt leadership approaches that reflect their doctrine and faith praxis (Resane, 2024). The church needs leaders who understand God's mission and obey His will in fulfilling it. This kind of leadership differs fundamentally from the business world, where leaders are expected to maximise profits and grow the value of an enterprise. Consequently, the corporate arena is inundated with leadership models aimed at maximising profit, and the church in Africa is sometimes tempted to adopt these corporate approaches and refine them for church leaders. Other church leaders, by contrast, hold the view that churches should develop leadership models rooted in theology that is, in an understanding of God in relation to leadership.

The intersection of theology and leadership has become more pressing because of this crisis of leadership in church and society (Foppen & van Saane, 2024). Huizing (2011) notes that a significant part of Christian leadership literature is heavily indebted to general leadership literature and tries to force Christ into those discussions. His plea to bring Christ to the leadership table rightly underscores the importance of integrating theology with leadership studies. However, this formulation, though helpful, casts Christ in an implicitly defined role as a guest at a table a forum of discussion and practice already set by human paradigms. In this paper, I propose the reverse: rather than Christ being invited to fit into existing leadership structures, leadership itself should be brought to the table of Christ. By "Christ's table," I mean the realm of Christ's own lordship, most fully disclosed in his self-giving at the Last Supper and the cross, in which his authority and not any prior human paradigm determines what counts as legitimate leadership. Leadership at Christ's table is therefore not merely informed by theology but is redefined at its root by the model of servanthood, humility, and sacrificial love that Christ himself exemplified in Matthew 20:25–28. The distinction between the two formulations bringing Christ to the leadership table and bringing leadership to Christ's table is not semantic but theological. The former begins with human leadership paradigms and incorporates Christ as a voice of change within them. The latter begins with Christ as Lord, under whose authority leadership must submit itself. This shift relocates the seat of power: the operative question is no longer "How can Christ help us lead better?" but "What does leadership become in the presence of the crucified and risen Christ?" This article argues that leadership must be brought to Christ's table, where it is judged, corrected, and re-formed by his example of servanthood, humility, and sacrificial love.

A significant portion of Christian leadership literature remains heavily indebted to general leadership theories, attempting to fit Christ into existing human paradigms (Huizing, 2011). This approach, while seeking to integrate theology with leadership studies, risks reducing Christ to a supplementary voice within frameworks already shaped by secular assumptions about power, success, and authority. The consequence is leadership that may be Christian in name but remains shaped by worldly measures of success, efficiency, and charisma rather than by the example of Christ's servanthood, humility, and sacrificial love. As Canavesi and Minelli (2022) demonstrate, secular servant leadership is justified by its organisational outcomes—it is adopted because it builds trust, commitment, and performance. Christ's kenotic model, by contrast, is grounded in the

identity and mission of Christ himself. It is not adopted because it works but because it is the pattern Christ embodied.

In the African church context, this problem is particularly acute, as churches struggle with leadership crises, personality cults, centralisation of power, and weak accountability structures (Onyeije, 2025; Tagwirei, 2024). Onyeije (2025) states that personality cults, centralisation of power, and exclusive decision-making have a serious effect on the lives of the Christian community and can also affect the mission of the church. Tagwirei (2024) demonstrates how powerful people within larger churches can silence the voices of others and decrease accountability. There is a pressing need for a contextual theology of leadership that begins not with human paradigms but with Christ's own example. Without such a framework, churches risk perpetuating leadership practices that contradict the gospel they proclaim.

## **Objectives**

1. To examine the distinction between bringing Christ to the leadership table and bringing leadership to Christ's table, demonstrating why the latter is theologically and practically superior.
2. To articulate three commitments that constitute a contextual theology of leadership: scriptural grounding, cultural critique, and missional orientation.
3. To differentiate Christ's kenotic model of leadership from secular servant leadership, highlighting the theological basis and implications of each.
4. To propose practical implications of leadership at Christ's table for church governance, formation, inclusion, missional witness, and crisis leadership.
5. To develop a contextual framework for leadership development in African churches that is scripturally grounded, culturally engaged, and missionally directed.

## **2. METHODS**

### **Research Approach**

This study adopts a contextual theological method, which seeks to interpret and apply Christian faith within specific cultural and historical contexts. Contextual theology recognises that theological reflection does not occur in a vacuum but is shaped by the cultural, social, and historical realities of the community doing the reflection (Bediako, 2004). As Bevans (2021, p. 5) notes, contextual theology is "a way of doing theology that takes into account the experience of the people, their culture, their social location, and their history." This approach is particularly appropriate for a study focused on African church leadership, as it allows for the integration of biblical insights with African cultural values and realities. The contextual theological method is grounded in the conviction that theology must be both faithful to the Christian tradition and relevant to the context in which it is articulated. This requires a dialectical engagement between Scripture, tradition, and culture. As Bediako (2004, p. 45) argues, "the Christian faith must be translated into the cultural categories of the people if it is to be truly received and lived." This study therefore engages Scripture with an awareness of African cultural values, seeking to discern what can be affirmed and what needs correction under Christ's lordship.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The article employs Osmer's (2008) four-task practical theology framework as a structure for theological reflection. This framework consists of four interrelated tasks that guide the process of theological reflection from observation to action.

### **The Descriptive-Empirical Task: What is Happening?**

The descriptive-empirical task requires honest observation of current leadership practices, challenges, and dynamics within African churches. This task encourages leaders to listen to the concerns of their members, observe leadership in decision-making, and consider how decisions impact members. Onyeije (2025) identifies personality cults, centralisation of power, and exclusive decision-making as known challenges in African churches. Tagwirei (2024) demonstrates how powerful people within larger churches can silence the voices of others and decrease accountability. The descriptive-empirical task helps churches not to simply ignore or spiritualise these problems but to recognise them.

### **The Interpretive Task: Why is it Happening?**

The interpretive task aims to address the question of why unhealthy leadership practices persist. It examines cultural, economic, and institutional factors that have an impact on leadership. Cultural values should be carefully examined. Western influences that encourage celebrity, charisma, and individualism may also play a role in why leadership challenges continue to persist. Contextual reflection, therefore, mirrors African and Western influence and not the idealisation of any one culture as the model of Christian leadership.

### **The Normative Task: What Ought to be Happening?**

The normative task evaluates current leadership practices using Scripture and the Christian tradition in order to know what ought to be happening. The example of Christ should be the ultimate leadership pattern, especially the kenosis. It is a call for leaders to be humble and selfless, whose actions become greater benefits to society. Authority must not be seen as controlling but as a duty to serve one's people. Church leaders must be answerable to God and the people. Leadership success must be measured by trust, justice, and mercy, not by membership and number of properties acquired.

### **The Pragmatic Task: How Should Churches Respond?**

The pragmatic task translates theological reflection into action. It encourages churches to create and experiment with expressions of Christ's leadership in their specific situation. Decision-making must be participatory, the financial system should be transparent, grievances must be addressed, and limitations to leadership authority must be acknowledged. The pragmatic task is not the culmination of one-off work. The church must keep on changing its practices, ensuring they are always in line with Scripture. When reforms are introduced, they must be evaluated and necessary changes made.

## **Data Sources**

The study draws on three main sources of data:

### **Scriptural Texts**

The article engages in exegesis of key biblical passages that model Christ's leadership: John 13:1–17 (the foot-washing), Matthew 20:25–28 (servant leadership), and Philippians 2:5–11 (kenosis). These texts provide the normative foundation for the theology of leadership being developed. The exegesis focuses on identifying the characteristics of Christ's leadership model, including servanthood, humility, and sacrificial love.

### **Leadership Scholarship**

The article engages with servant leadership literature (Eva et al., 2019; Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Hoch et al., 2018) to distinguish secular servant leadership from Christ's kenotic model. This engagement allows for a critical comparison that highlights the theological distinctiveness of Christ's model. Eva et al. (2019) provide a comprehensive review of servant leadership research, while Canavesi and Minelli (2022) offer a network analysis that identifies key themes and gaps. Hoch et al. (2018) conduct a meta-analysis that compares servant leadership with other leadership approaches.

### **African Theological Resources**

The article draws on African theology, particularly the work of Bediako (2004) and the concept of Ubuntu, to explore how African cultural values can affirm and enrich Christian leadership. Bediako's work on the translation of the Christian faith into African cultural categories provides a theological foundation for contextual reflection. Ubuntu, as Okecha et al. (2024) demonstrate, emphasises that we exist because of our relationship with others, which aligns with the biblical concepts of community and interdependence.

### **Analytical Procedure**

The analysis follows a systematic procedure:

### **Exegesis**

Key biblical texts are examined to identify the characteristics of Christ's leadership model. The exegesis focuses on the literary context, theological themes, and practical implications of each passage. For John 13:1–17, the focus is on the significance of foot-washing as a model of servant leadership. For Matthew 20:25–28, the focus is on the contrast between worldly and Kingdom leadership. For Philippians 2:5–11, the focus is on the concept of kenosis as the foundation of Christ's leadership.

## **Comparative Analysis**

Secular servant leadership is compared with Christ's kenotic model to highlight theological differences. The comparison is structured around four dimensions: basis, justification, measure of success, and scope of self-giving. This analysis makes explicit the differences that are often obscured in Christian leadership literature.

## **Contextual Reflection**

African cultural values (Ubuntu, communalism, respect for elders) are examined to determine what can be affirmed and what needs correction under Christ's lordship. This reflection draws on the work of Bediako (2004) and Okecha et al. (2024) to ensure that the analysis is both theologically sound and culturally relevant.

## **Synthesis**

The findings are synthesised into a contextual theology of leadership with three commitments: scriptural grounding, cultural critique, and missional orientation. This synthesis integrates the exegetical, comparative, and contextual analyses into a coherent framework.

## **Application**

Practical implications are proposed for church governance, formation, inclusion, missional witness, and crisis leadership. These implications are drawn from the theological framework and are intended to guide practical action.

## **Ethical Considerations**

This study is a theological and constructive paper based on biblical, theological, and cultural sources. No empirical data were collected, and therefore no human participants were involved. The study adheres to academic integrity standards, including proper citation of sources, honest representation of opposing views, and transparency about the study's scope and limitations.

## **3. RESULTS**

### **Leadership at Christ's Table: A Kenotic Model**

The exegesis of key biblical texts reveals a distinct model of leadership that differs fundamentally from secular paradigms. In John 13:1–17, Christ washes His disciples' feet a task reserved for servants. This act demonstrates that leadership at Christ's table is not about lording it over others or self-elevation but about service and humility. The significance of this act is underscored by John's statement that "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). Christ's leadership is grounded in love that is sacrificial and enduring. The foot-washing is not a symbolic gesture but a concrete demonstration of the kind of leadership that Christ expects of his followers.

In Matthew 20:25–28, Christ contrasts "the rulers of the Gentiles," who "lord it over" others, with his mandate that "whoever wants to be great must be your servant." Christ redefines greatness in terms of caring for the vulnerable and service. The passage is set in the context of a dispute among the disciples about who would be greatest in the Kingdom. Christ responds by inverting the world's understanding of greatness: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matthew 20:25–27). This inversion is central to Christ's model of leadership.

Philippians 2:5–11 presents the ultimate model of kenosis—self-emptying—as Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." This is not a technique adopted for effectiveness but a theological ethic rooted in Christ's own identity and mission. Paul writes: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:5–7). The kenotic model is not a process aimed at success but a lifestyle shaped by Christ's example.

**Table 1: Secular Servant Leadership and Christ's Kenotic Leadership Compared**

| <b>Dimension</b>            | <b>Secular Servant Leadership</b>                                                       | <b>Christ's Kenotic Leadership</b>                                                 |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Basis</b>                | An organisational practice (Eva et al., 2019)                                           | A theological ethic rooted in Christ's self-emptying (Phil. 2:5–11)                |
| <b>Justification</b>        | Adopted because it improves trust, commitment, and behaviour (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022) | Required because it is the pattern Christ himself embodied                         |
| <b>Measure of success</b>   | Produces organisational outcomes of trust, retention, and performance                   | Measured by faithfulness to Christ's example, regardless of measurable outcome     |
| <b>Scope of self-giving</b> | Leader chooses to prioritise interests of followers                                     | Leader relinquishes privilege as a matter of identity, not strategy (Erwich, 2020) |

*Source: Constructed by Researcher, 2026*

The kenotic model of leadership is not a process aimed at success but a lifestyle shaped by Christ's example. Leaders are admonished to exercise restraint, share authority, and direct resources toward common use (Ottuh, 2020). This kenotic ethic is practical, not symbolic. Foot-washing was not a ritual gesture; it teaches that leaders must be willing to perform lowly duties (Erwich, 2020). In the African church context, this model affirms what is good and opposes dictatorship and

marginalisation. Its influence may extend beyond the church into civic life, where participatory, accountable leadership builds public trust and enables real change (Oyekan, 2024).

### **Three Commitments of a Contextual Theology of Leadership**

The contextual theological reflection, structured through Osmer's (2008) four-task framework, yields three interlocking commitments that constitute a contextual theology of leadership:

#### **Scriptural Grounding**

Scriptural grounding anchors leadership in the teaching and example of Christ rather than in titles, achievements, or organisational metrics. The Gospels consistently present leadership as humble, sacrificial love (John 13:1–17; Matthew 20:25–28), and this grounding transforms servant leadership from an effective technique into a theological ethic: kenosis is not adopted because it produces trust and empowerment but obeyed because it is the pattern Christ himself embodied. Without scriptural grounding, cultural critique collapses into either uncritical cultural affirmation or uncritical Western import there is no fixed point from which to judge either.

The normative task of Osmer's framework is particularly relevant here. It evaluates current practices in light of Scripture and the Christian tradition. The example of Christ should be the ultimate leadership pattern, especially the kenosis. It is a call for leaders to be humble and selfless, whose actions become greater benefits to society. Authority must not be seen as controlling but as a duty to serve one's people. Church leaders must be answerable to God and the people.

#### **Cultural Critique**

Cultural critique ensures that scriptural grounding is not applied in the abstract but tested against the leader's actual cultural inheritance. African values of communal solidarity, respect for elders, and Ubuntu can strengthen relational, inclusive leadership, yet the same soil can produce authoritarianism, gender exclusion, or unaccountable sacred hierarchy. The Kingdom of God, not culture, supplies the final criterion. Culture provides the idiom, but Christ corrects, redirects, and where necessary opposes it. Without cultural critique, scriptural grounding risks becoming an abstraction applied identically everywhere, ignoring the real cultural forms leadership takes.

The interpretive task of Osmer's framework is essential here. It seeks to understand why unhealthy leadership practices persist, examining cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Cultural values should be carefully examined. Western influences that encourage celebrity, charisma, and individualism may also play a role in why leadership challenges continue to persist. Contextual reflection, therefore, mirrors African and Western influence and not the idealisation of any one culture as the model of Christian leadership.

## Missional Orientation

Missional orientation keeps leadership from becoming an end in itself: its purpose is God's reconciling work in the world (Colossians 1:20), not institutional survival or personal recognition. The operative question is never "Does this sustain the organisation?" but "Does this advance reconciliation, justice, and witness?" Without missional orientation, both grounding and critique can be satisfied on paper while leadership remains oriented toward institutional self-preservation. The pragmatic task of Osmer's framework connects here. It translates theological reflection into action. Decision-making must be participatory, the financial system should be transparent, grievances must be addressed, and limitations to leadership authority must be acknowledged. The pragmatic task is not the culmination of one-off work. The church must keep on changing its practices, ensuring they are always in line with Scripture.

These three commitments do not operate independently but as a single, continuous movement, each correcting a different failure mode of the others. Without scriptural grounding, cultural critique collapses into either uncritical cultural affirmation or uncritical Western import—there is no fixed point from which to judge either. Without cultural critique, scriptural grounding risks becoming an abstraction applied identically everywhere, ignoring the real cultural forms leadership takes. Without missional orientation, both grounding and critique can be satisfied on paper while leadership remains oriented toward institutional self-preservation.

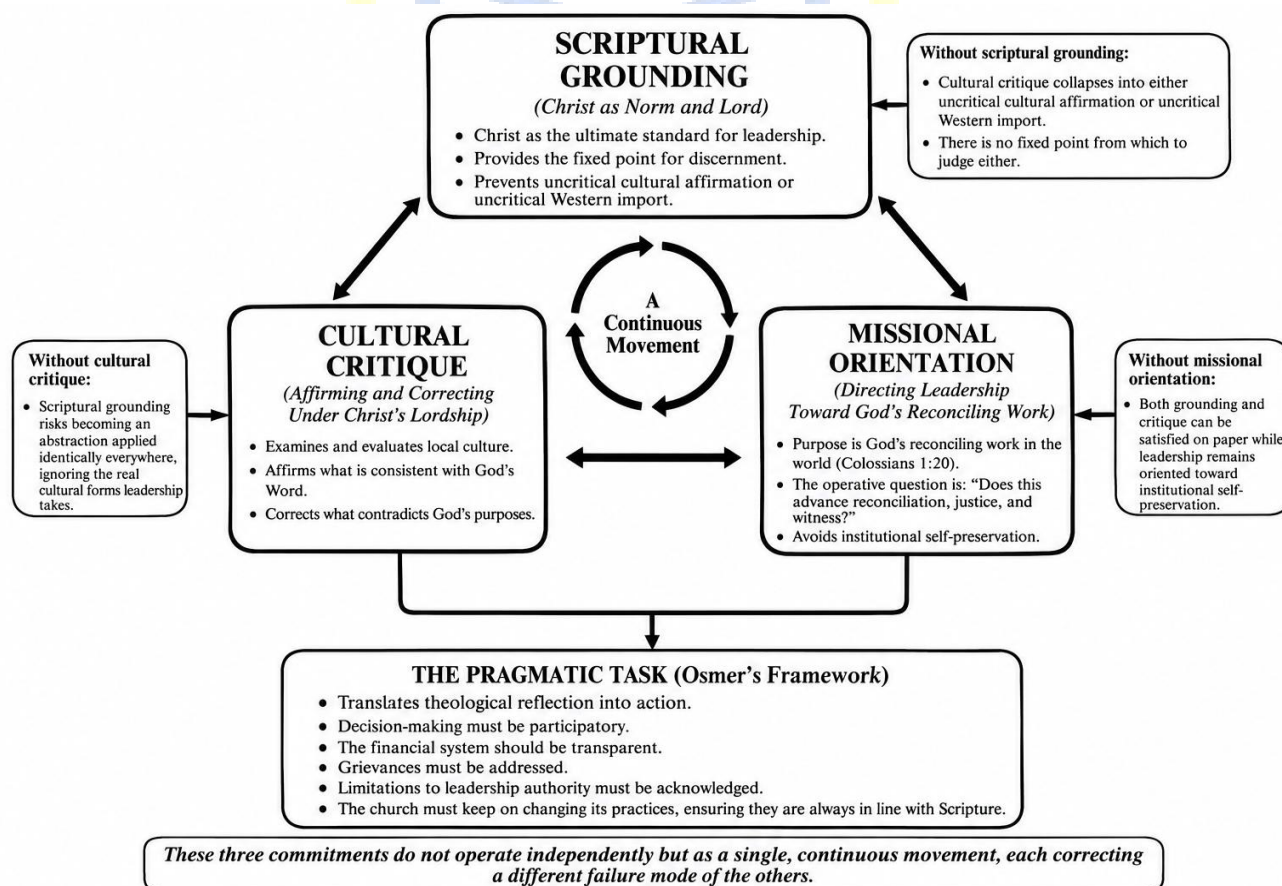


Figure 1: The Three Commitments of a Contextual Theology of Leadership. Source: Constructed by Researcher, 2026

## Differentiating the Two Approaches

The difference between bringing Christ to the leadership table (Huizing, 2011) and bringing leadership to the table of Christ is not a matter of phrasing but of two distinct theological orientations. Huizing's approach begins with existing leadership theory and brings Christ into it, seeking to enrich or adjust current paradigms. Its virtue is that it speaks the language of contemporary scholarship; its risk is that Christ becomes a guest at a table already set by human theories. Bringing leadership to Christ's table reverses this order: Christ is host, and leadership is called to his table to follow his examples.

**Table 2: Bringing Christ to the Leadership Table vs. Bringing Leadership to Christ's Table**

| Aspect                         | Bringing Christ to the Leadership Table                                                                                           | Bringing Leadership to Christ's Table                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Starting point</b>          | Begins with existing human leadership theories and practices; Christ is added as an influence or inspiration                      | Begins with Christ as authority; all leadership is tested and reshaped in his presence                                                                |
| <b>Role of Christ</b>          | Christ is invited to enrich existing leadership models                                                                            | Christ is host, defining, guiding, and altering leadership through his own pattern of servanthood and sacrifice                                       |
| <b>Engagement with culture</b> | Culture largely frames the model; Christian values are added without sustained critique                                           | Culture is taken seriously but filtered critically under Christ's lordship, affirming what reflects Kingdom values, rejecting what does not           |
| <b>Outcome</b>                 | Risk of surface Christianity in which leadership still pursues success, status, or popularity                                     | Cruciform, servant leadership in which humility, justice, love, and service take precedence over recognition or power                                 |
| <b>Example</b>                 | Secular leadership theory (e.g., transformational or transactional leadership) supplemented with biblical language or proof-texts | Christ washing his disciples' feet (John 13); rotating committee leadership; open publication of budgets; women and youth included in decision-making |

*Source: Constructed by Researcher, 2026*

The distinction is not between two styles of leading but between two authorities under which leadership operates. One retains inherited paradigms with minor adjustment; the other submits to genuine re-formation. It is the latter that yields a cruciform leadership one shaped by the cross and oriented toward God's purposes rather than institutional or personal advancement.

The stakes of this difference are not merely academic. Where leaders attempt to fit Christ into their existing theories, they typically stop asking whether those models actually embody the gospel instead of secular measures of growth, efficiency, and charisma (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). Such leadership, however well-intentioned, is Christian in name more than in substance. Under the lordship of Christ, by contrast, the measure of success shifts to faithfulness, justice, humility, and attentiveness to the vulnerable.

## **Practical Responses to Leadership Concerns**

The contextual theological reflection yields practical responses to specific leadership concerns identified in African churches. Table 3 summarises these responses.

**Table 3: Practical Responses to Leadership Concerns in African Churches**

| Concern Identified                                               | Practical Intervention                                                                                                                                                     | Source                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Exclusion of women and young people from decision-making         | Restructure church councils to include women, young people, and other underrepresented members                                                                             | Ferdinando (2008)             |
| Inaccessible accountability processes                            | Translate governance policies, financial reports, and accountability procedures into local languages                                                                       | Ferdinando (2008)             |
| Celebrity-oriented and personality-centred leadership            | Conduct regular listening sessions with members and staff; establish shared ministry platforms; implement leadership rotation systems; share critical leadership decisions | Okecha et al. (2024)          |
| Lack of accountability of leaders in the use of church resources | Place welfare and other church funds under diverse committees with clear rules; conduct independent audits; hold open budget discussions                                   | Onyeije (2025)                |
| Leadership success measured mainly by numbers and finances       | Evaluate leadership according to trust, justice, restored relationships, social cohesion, and community wellbeing                                                          | Okecha et al. (2024)          |
| Theological reflection that does not lead to lasting change      | Hold quarterly "table forums" involving listening, cultural analysis, Christ-centred evaluation, practical action, and follow-up assessment                                | Osmer (2008); Tagwirei (2024) |

*Source: Compiled by Researcher, 2026*

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **The Superiority of Bringing Leadership to Christ's Table**

The findings demonstrate that bringing leadership to Christ's table is theologically superior to merely bringing Christ to the leadership table. This superiority is evident in several ways. First, when leadership is brought to Christ's table, the starting point is Christ's own example of servanthood, humility, and sacrificial love rather than human paradigms of power, status, and success. This ensures that leadership is fundamentally shaped by the gospel rather than by worldly measures of effectiveness. As Huizing (2011) himself acknowledges, much Christian leadership literature is heavily indebted to general leadership literature. The present study demonstrates that this approach, while well-intentioned, risks producing leadership that is Christian in name but shaped by worldly assumptions. Second, this approach subjects all leadership practices whether African or Western to the scrutiny of Christ's lordship. Cultural values are affirmed where they reflect Kingdom values and corrected where they contradict them. This is consistent with Bediako's (2004) argument that the Christian faith must be translated into the cultural categories

of the people if it is to be truly received and lived. The African values of communal solidarity, respect for elders, and Ubuntu can strengthen relational, inclusive leadership, yet the same soil can produce authoritarianism, gender exclusion, or unaccountable sacred hierarchy. The Kingdom of God, not culture, supplies the final criterion. Third, bringing leadership to Christ's table reorients leadership toward God's reconciling mission rather than institutional self-preservation. The operative question becomes "Does this advance reconciliation, justice, and witness?" rather than "Does this sustain the organisation?" This missional orientation ensures that leadership serves God's purposes rather than becoming an end in itself. As Ottuh (2020) argues, the kenotic model is not a process aimed at success but a lifestyle shaped by Christ's example.

#### **4.2 The Distinctiveness of Christ's Kenotic Model**

The comparison between secular servant leadership and Christ's kenotic model reveals fundamental differences that are often obscured in Christian leadership literature. Secular servant leadership, as Eva et al. (2019) and Canavesi and Minelli (2022) demonstrate, is justified by its organisational outcomes it is adopted because it builds trust, commitment, and performance. Christ's kenotic model, by contrast, is grounded in the identity and mission of Christ himself. It is not adopted because it works but because it is the pattern Christ embodied. This distinction has profound implications. When servant leadership is adopted for organisational outcomes, it risks becoming another management technique useful but ultimately replaceable. When kenosis is embraced as a theological ethic, it becomes a non-negotiable commitment that shapes every aspect of leadership. As Ottuh (2020) argues, the kenotic model is not a process aimed at success but a lifestyle shaped by Christ's example.

This finding resonates with the African theological emphasis on community and interdependence. Ubuntu, as Okecha et al. (2024) demonstrate, emphasises that we exist because of our relationship with others. Christ's kenotic model, which involves self-emptying for the sake of others, is deeply compatible with Ubuntu. Together, they can form the basis for leadership that is caring, accountable, and inclusive. Ubuntu and servant leadership reveal the dignity of humanity, our interdependence on one another, and the common good of our community (Okecha et al., 2024). Ubuntu can help churches in Africa to have leadership that is caring, accountable, and inclusive.

#### **The Role of Contextual Theological Reflection**

The application of Osmer's (2008) four-task framework demonstrates the importance of contextual theological reflection for developing leadership that is both faithful and relevant. The descriptive-empirical task requires honest observation of current leadership practices, including personality cults, centralisation of power, and exclusive decision-making (Onyeije, 2025; Tagwirei, 2024). The interpretive task seeks to understand why these practices persist, examining cultural, economic, and institutional factors. The normative task evaluates current practices in light of Scripture and Christian tradition, identifying what ought to be happening. The pragmatic task translates theological reflection into practical action. This framework is particularly valuable for African churches because it affirms the importance of cultural context while subjecting it to theological evaluation. As Bediako (2004) argues, African cultural values of communal solidarity and respect for elders are consistent with biblical concepts of community and service. Yet these same values can be abused to rationalise autocratic rule, gender discrimination, and abuse of power. Contextual theological reflection enables churches to affirm what is good and correct what

is not. The framework also addresses a common weakness in theological reflection: the failure to translate reflection into action. The pragmatic task ensures that theological reflection leads to concrete changes in practice. The quarterly "table forums" proposed by Tagwirei (2024) offer a practical mechanism for ongoing contextual theological reflection. These forums involve listening, cultural analysis, Christ-centred evaluation, practical action, and follow-up assessment, creating a cycle of continuous improvement.

### **Implications for Church and Society**

The findings yield five core implications for church and society:

#### **Servanthood and Formation as the Measure of Leadership**

When leadership is brought to Christ's table, service becomes the key element in measuring success. The example set by Christ in washing the feet of his disciples demonstrates real power and authority. Servant leadership research confirms that this orientation builds trust and positive behaviour within communities (Eva et al., 2019). Christ-centred leadership is formation growing into the likeness of Christ, mutual care, and missional engagement. This relevant measure is deeper than organisational health and the size of the institution. This means African churches should evaluate leadership not by numerical growth but by asking concrete formation questions such as: Are the least-heard now speaking? Are burdens being shared rather than carried alone? Is generosity increasing?

#### **Governance, Transparency, and Ethical Means**

Leadership at Christ's table treats power as a gift to be stewarded, not a privilege to be defended (Tolbert, 2023). This is a claim with direct implications for institutional governance and the handling of money. The risk of abuse and spiritual harm is seen when there is ambiguity of power and celebrity-centred leadership. Participatory leadership and external accountability reduce it as well (Hoch et al., 2018). Kenosis may become a platform for this accountability to be extended to economic practices. Stewardship must not only be treated as an administrative matter but leaders must be willing to relinquish control over funds. The way by which leaders pursue good goals must relate to moral right. Manipulative fundraising or self-promotion in ministry should not be entertained even when it produces good results (Udoekpo & Obiorah, 2023). There must be the need for transparent and open leadership gathering except on confidential matters.

#### **Inclusion, Voice, and Communal Belonging**

A church that reflects the body of Christ must allow every view to be heard. Leadership should not be in the hands of a few individuals but must involve anyone who has the ability to lead. African and majority-world theology affirms cultural strengths. It must reject practices such as male domination and excessive power control that contradict the cruciform form of leadership (Bediako, 2000). This affirmation-and-critique is in harmony with Ubuntu. Ubuntu grounds inclusion not only in external policy but also in a shared account of communal dignity and interdependence. Servant leadership is in agreement with these values and principles (Hoch et al., 2018). This attitude can help both men and women to occupy leadership positions. It also ensures that the youth are included in the decision-making process. Meetings are conducted in such a way

that the quieter voices are given the opportunity to speak, and reconciliation is in place to repair trust.

### **Missional Witness and Civic Trust**

Leadership at Christ's table extends its credibility beyond the walls of the church. Values such as service, defence of the vulnerable, and honest speech against corruption build the social trust that opens space for the gospel to be heard (Craun & Henson, 2022). The church will be able to pursue its mission when it is seen as relevant. In schools, local government, and NGOs, this ethic of accountability and fairness can be relevant. Churches can also partner with local communities on societal needs and concerns. The church should support the local government in capacity-building. On digital space, the church should lead online communication well with values of integrity and truthfulness about data and accessibility.

### **Crisis Leadership and Resilience**

The impact of leadership at Christ's table is mostly seen in crises such as pandemic, disaster, or political instability. Church leaders are to exhibit fairness, honesty, and participation in dealing with problems. In the midst of this, the church leader must continue to be in the presence of God to gain divine wisdom and direction. Church leaders are also supposed to be sincere and admit when they do not have all the answers. Others who have the ability to help address the problem must be encouraged to participate in the problem-solving process. Sharing decision-making with frontline personnel helps to preserve both dignity and inclusiveness.

### **A Contextual Framework for Leadership Development**

The findings support the development of a contextual framework for leadership development in African churches. This framework is characterised by three interlocking commitments:

#### **Scriptural Grounding**

Leadership formation must be anchored in the teaching and example of Christ. This requires intentional engagement with Scripture, particularly the Gospels' presentation of Christ's servant leadership. The example of Christ in John 13:1–17, Matthew 20:25–28, and Philippians 2:5–11 provides the normative foundation for leadership. As Ferdinando (2008) argues, theological education must prioritise character formation alongside knowledge acquisition. This requires a holistic approach to leadership development that integrates spiritual formation, theological understanding, and practical skills.

#### **Cultural Critique**

Leadership formation must be culturally engaged, affirming African values that reflect Kingdom values and correcting those that do not. This requires honest engagement with cultural norms and practices. As Bediako (2004) argues, the Christian faith must be translated into the cultural categories of the people. Ubuntu, with its emphasis on community and interdependence, can enrich Christian leadership. However, cultural values that contradict the gospel such as authoritarianism,

gender exclusion, and abuse of power must be challenged. This requires a critical engagement with culture that is both affirming and corrective.

### **Missional Orientation**

Leadership formation must be oriented toward God's reconciling mission. The purpose of leadership is not institutional survival or personal recognition but the advancement of God's Kingdom. As Craun and Henson (2022) demonstrate, values such as service, defence of the vulnerable, and honest speech build the social trust that opens space for the gospel. Leadership formation must therefore equip leaders to participate in God's mission of reconciliation, justice, and transformation.

These commitments form a cycle of ongoing formation, not a one-time event. Leaders are continually formed as they engage Scripture, reflect on culture, and participate in God's mission. The quarterly "table forums" proposed by Tagwirei (2024) provide a practical mechanism for this ongoing formation. These forums involve listening, cultural analysis, Christ-centred evaluation, practical action, and follow-up assessment, creating a cycle of continuous improvement.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Summary of Findings**

This article has argued that leadership should be brought to the table of Christ, where his lordship defines and reforms what leadership is. The study has demonstrated that:

1. **Leadership at Christ's table is kenotic and cruciform.** The example of Christ in John 13:1–17, Matthew 20:25–28, and Philippians 2:5–11 presents a model of leadership grounded in self-emptying love, service, and humility. This model differs fundamentally from secular servant leadership, which is justified by organisational outcomes rather than by faithfulness to Christ's example.
2. **A contextual theology of leadership rests on three interlocking commitments:** scriptural grounding, cultural critique, and missional orientation. These commitments work together to prevent the uncritical adoption of secular leadership models and to ensure that leadership is oriented toward God's reconciling work.
3. **The distinction between bringing Christ to the leadership table and bringing leadership to Christ's table is theological, not merely semantic.** The former begins with human paradigms and adds Christ; the latter begins with Christ and submits leadership to his authority. This distinction has practical implications for governance, inclusion, and missional witness.
4. **Practical responses to leadership concerns in African churches** include inclusive decision-making, accessible accountability processes, shared leadership platforms, transparent financial management, and holistic measures of success. These responses address the specific challenges identified in the literature, including personality cults, centralisation of power, and weak accountability structures.
5. **A contextual framework for leadership development** integrates scriptural grounding, cultural critique, and missional orientation in a cycle of ongoing formation. This

framework offers a demanding but faithful pattern for leadership that is answerable at every point to Christ.

### **Contributions to Knowledge**

This study makes several contributions to knowledge:

#### **Theoretical Contributions**

First, the study offers a corrective to the tendency within Christian leadership scholarship to adopt secular models uncritically and merely add Christian language. By demonstrating the theological and practical superiority of bringing leadership to Christ's table, the study challenges the implicit assumption that human leadership paradigms provide the appropriate starting point for Christian leadership.

Second, the study develops a contextual theology of leadership that integrates scriptural grounding, cultural critique, and missional orientation. This framework offers a comprehensive approach to leadership that is both faithful to the Christian tradition and relevant to the African context.

Third, the study clarifies the distinction between secular servant leadership and Christ's kenotic model. This distinction has been obscured in much Christian leadership literature, leading to confusion about the theological basis and implications of servant leadership.

#### **Practical Contributions**

First, the study provides practical guidance for churches seeking to align their leadership practices with the example of Christ. The practical responses summarised in Table 3 offer concrete interventions for addressing specific leadership concerns.

Second, the study offers a framework for leadership development that is scripturally grounded, culturally engaged, and missionally directed. This framework can guide the design of leadership formation programs in African churches.

Third, the study contributes to the broader conversation on ecclesial leadership, offering insights that may be relevant beyond the African context. The emphasis on kenosis, cultural critique, and missional orientation has implications for churches in other contexts facing similar leadership challenges.

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