Good Governance and Management for a Sustainable Future of the Church: Exploring Ubuntu as a Framework of Necessity

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Abstract

This article examines the Ubuntu philosophical framework as a transformative approach to enhancing good governance within churches. Ubuntu, rooted in African philosophy, champions interconnectedness, generosity, and communal responsibility, reinforcing ethical leadership and sustainable governance structures. The research that undergirds this article explored how collective participation and shared accountability contribute to improved church leadership practices, fostering trust and inclusivity among congregants. To achieve its objectives, this article employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on non-numerical data to capture lived experiences. Quantitative elements supplement the analysis, with interviews conducted among key informants from two denominations. Findings reveal that effective governance and management are pivotal to church sustainability, improving leadership standards and ensuring ethical stewardship. Furthermore, biblical perspectives on stewardship and leadership underscore the necessity of strategic planning, financial management, and human resource development within church structures. However, inadequate theological education often leads to poor governance and leadership dependency, hampering institutional resilience. This paper advocates for integrating governance and management principles within church administration, demonstrating how Ubuntu-based leadership models foster empowerment, sustainability, and adaptability in evolving socio-political contexts. Ultimately, an Ubuntu framework provides a compelling governance approach that prioritizes ethical leadership, congregational empowerment, and structured administration, ensuring churches remain resilient and impactful in their communities.

Keywords: Sustainable Future of the Church, Good Governance, Management

Introduction

Leadership and governance are essential pillars of any institution's sustainability, including the church. As a faith-based organization, the church exists not only to provide spiritual guidance but also to serve and uplift its community. However, its ability to fulfil this mission depends on ethical governance and strong leadership qualities that foster unity, transparency, and responsible stewardship. Without well-structured governance, churches risk inefficiency, diminished trust, and a weakened ability to meet their congregations' needs.

Ubuntu, an African philosophy centered on interconnectedness and communal responsibility, offers a transformative framework for church leadership. At its core, Ubuntu emphasizes that leadership is not an individual pursuit but a collective effort, where leaders serve the community with humility and integrity. This philosophy aligns with ethical governance models, promoting participatory decision-making, accountability, and resource-sharing.

Through Ubuntu, church leaders cultivate inclusive environments where all members feel valued and empowered to contribute to the institution's sustainability.

Integrating Ubuntu principles into leadership and governance can help churches ensure longevity, adaptability, and a deeper sense of communal faith. Ethical leadership, guided by Ubuntu, fosters a culture of servant leadership, one that mirrors the teachings of Jesus, who led by example and prioritised service to others. Transparent governance further strengthens the church's ability to manage resources effectively, resolve conflicts fairly, and maintain credibility within the broader society. A church that embraces Ubuntu-led governance is more than an institution; it becomes a thriving, sustainable faith community where spiritual and administrative leadership work harmoniously. This holistic approach ensures the church's long-term viability, enabling it to continue fulfilling its mission for generations to come.

Literature Review

The African Philosophy of Ubuntu and Church Governance

In Africa, poor governance remains a widespread issue affecting organizational stability. Effective management is vital for institutional growth, and the church is no exception. To address sustainability challenges, Ubuntu, a philosophy rooted in shared humanity, offers a potential governance framework. Ubuntu, derived from the Nguni term **"umntu ngumntu ngabantu"** (meaning "a person is a person because of others"), underscores interconnectedness and collective responsibility (Gade, 2012). It extends beyond philosophical discourse to applications in leadership, social justice, and conflict resolution. It has inspired societies globally to pursue inclusive, just, and compassionate governance (Mbigi, 2005). Mbigi (2005) further explains that an individual's well-being is directly tied to their community. Applying Ubuntu principles within church leadership could foster ethical governance, strengthen congregational ties, and ensure sustainable growth.

There are many philosophies people use to govern their own lives; these philosophies, or ways of life, come from the environments people are part of. Each philosophy emphasises certain principles as absolutely key. Ubuntu is no different and also has its own key principles. If you have not mentioned them, your idea of Ubuntu is incomplete. The following attempts to clearly define the principle that embodies Ubuntu in the true sense of it.

The principles of good governance and management can be inspired by the philosophy of Ubuntu, which fosters a more inclusive, ethically driven approach. This can inspire how the church is managed, creating a harmonious environment and an approach that is resilient in building better communities and fostering greater empathy. When Ubuntu is integrated into the systems of governance and management, the church would be a stronger church that serves the needs of its own congregants. Ubuntu, as a philosophy or way of life for some people, is embedded in certain key principles or words that clearly attempt to explain what this Ubuntu phenomenon is and how far one can relate to it. How can these principles play a pivotal role in governing and managing the church? These principles include interconnectedness, compassion, empathy, and community cooperation, amongst others, which will be clearly defined.

Creation Interconnectedness Nourished by Ubuntu

Ubuntu makes us part of a greater whole, and there must be an understanding that our actions and decisions not only affect us but also impact the people around us and what they decide and do impacts us (Tutu, 1999). Ubuntu speaks to how all are part of the larger community and how our actions impact others. In governance, this recognises that all stakeholders depend on one another for their success. Once there is an understanding that no one can exist in isolation within any organisation, this leads to a more holistic approach to governance. All the stakeholders are part of the policy-making decision that ensures sustainability for the future of the church (Gade, 2012). When it comes to management, it speaks to an understanding that the success of the organisation depends on the well-being of the employees, customers and the community. The management, when using this philosophy, fosters an inclusive work environment, and every contribution is appreciated and well-received by the management. This does not exempt the church because it is also an organization and everyone wants their voice to be recognised. This should spearhead a better approach to even the marginalised group within churches, be it based on gender or social status (Gade, 2012). Ubuntu and the bible share common values and principles that foster mutual respect, compassion and the importance of community. In the Bible, there is a clear interconnectedness that exists, especially in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, which speaks to the body of Christ and how each member in a body plays a significant role in ensuring that the body functions well. All parts of the body complement one another because interconnectedness is key.

Compassion and Empathy

One cannot define Ubuntu without these words as part of compassion, kindness, and empathy towards the people you share a community with (Mandela, 2006). Ubuntu insists on principles like kindness and empathy towards others. This approach would also assist in governance because leaders would prioritise the concerns and needs of the people they serve. This will then strengthen the bond between the governing structures and the people because the people have seen a leadership that is concern of their well-being (Tutu, 1999). If management wants employees who are satisfied, loyal and productive, the management must be compassionate to the needs of the people. Management must be willing to address those concerns, and then workers will be happy. In the church, when congregants are not happy, and even their voices are not heard, they withdraw spiritually, and in giving out their money and other offerings, if there is a sense of care from the management, then you see happier congregants who are willing to sacrifice for the well-being of the church (Mandela, 2006). The Bible in Colossians 3:12 "therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (NIV). In Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as Christ forgave you" (NIV). Compassion and empathy are integral to both the Bible and the Ubuntu philosophy. In a community, you cannot be at peace without compassion for one another. If one goes through a difficult time and no one is there to empathise with them. Both Ubuntu and biblical teachings speak with the same voice on this.

Community Cooperation

Ubuntu fosters a sense of community through collaboration and mutual support. There is value in collective efforts (Gade, 2012). Ubuntu: Values collective efforts and collaboration, fostering a sense of community. Good governance thrives on social cohesion, which is brought about by the involvement of all stakeholders in decision-making processes. There is an intentional collective approach and efforts to ensure policies reflect the overall community, which is inclusive, so that the community can cooperate. (Mandela, 2006).

Management, in order to be effective, collaboration is key: a collective approach to solving problems within the organisation and diversifying skills so everyone can contribute. The church has a variety of skills at its disposal; it just needs to open a platform that allows everyone to excel in their skill. When skills are put together, you get a well-managed church (UNDP, 2018). The Bible insists on a community approach and working together for the good of the people. Acts 22:44-47 speaks to the early Christian community, where people shared everything with

one another and supported one another in all they faced. They went so far as to sell properties to help those in need. It is this parallelism between the Bible and the philosophy of Ubuntu that allows it to be implemented in a church context.

Respect and Dignity

In Ubuntu, everyone is given their due respect and dignity, irrespective of their status or background. Everyone must be treated equally (Mbigi, 2005). Ubuntu: Stresses the importance of treating everyone with respect and dignity. Respect and dignity are key elements in Ubuntu. When you treat everyone with respect and dignity, you have won their hearts. People want to feel respected and treated fairly and justly. To maintain harmony, everyone must be in a space where respect is shown to them, regardless of their position. In the church context, there is a hierarchy, from the bishop to the layperson, but it is very important that even the member who holds no position is afforded the same respect as everyone else (Mbigi, 2005). Accordingly, managers should treat all employees with respect and dignity, regardless of their position or background. This respect fosters a positive work culture in which employees feel valued and motivated to contribute their best efforts (Mbigi, 2005). We are all created in the image of God, Genesis 1:27 "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them" (NIV). In 1 Peter 2:17, "Show respect to everyone "How can one then decide not to show respect to a fellow person who, in their own right, represents God? How can one not afford someone dignity when the bible clearly states that we should respect everyone? This teaching is also embedded in the philosophy of Ubuntu that dignity is shown especially to those who are marginalised in the community, and widows are given extra care due to their circumstances.

Respect and dignity are Intact.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

When Archbishop D.Tutu speaks of Ubuntu promoting forgiveness and reconciliation in order for people to find healing and create good relationships, because Ubuntu cannot thrive in a community that does not get along, because it says you are that I am, this becomes fundamental for Ubuntu (Tutu, 1999). Ubuntu: Promotes forgiveness and reconciliation as essential for healing and harmonious relationships. How does one govern the church or any organisation without the culture of forgiveness and reconciliation? In a workplace, people coming from different backgrounds meet when there are adults, just as in church, there will be disagreements because these are adults. Peace and conflict resolution take precedence above everything else for the productivity of the organisation. There is a need not only for forgiveness but also for

healing so that good relationships are built in the church. This makes it easy to discuss any issues because people are healed (Tutu, 1999).

In management, promoting forgiveness and reconciliation can help address conflicts and misunderstandings within the team. By fostering a culture of forgiveness, managers can create a harmonious work environment where employees feel comfortable expressing their concerns and working through challenges together. In management, misunderstandings are inevitable, but forgiveness and reconciliation must be promoted for the well-being of the organisation. There is no church that can be sustainable if it does not promote conflict resolution for its people. When this is done, everyone feels free to express themselves and those concerns are addressed fairly (Tutu, 1999). Forgiveness and reconciliation are not only an Ubuntu key principle but also a very important theme within the bible when Matthew 6:14-15 speaks to the issue of forgiveness "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you but if you do not forgive the sins of others, your father will not forgive your sins" Colossians 3:13 encourages believers to "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (NIV). We must therefore understand this is what is expected from the church and its members. When there is a lack of forgiveness, nothing will ever go forward. The church leaders must push the agenda of forgiveness and reconciliation to maintain a healthy congregation.

People-Oriented Leadership and the Principle of Ubuntu

This model underscores the importance of collaboration and encourages leaders to inspire team members to reach their full potential and contribute ideas that advance the organisation. Often referred to as people-oriented leadership, this approach enhances productivity, efficiency, employee engagement, and satisfaction. It necessitates close interactions between leaders and their followers to develop effective strategies for growth, provide support, and offer guidance that improves individual and organisational performance.

Team-oriented leaders embody characteristics such as goal orientation, insightfulness, effective communication skills, and empathy. A critical understanding emerges that leadership is nearly unattainable without involving others in the process of understanding and embracing the organisational vision. Leaders must actively engage team members in this vision. Earley (1993) identifies this concept as the hallmark of an effective team—a group of individuals

working interdependently to accomplish a shared goal. This framework emphasises reliance not on individual performance but on collective team effort, ensuring that each member understands and performs their assigned responsibilities. Judeh (2011) further elaborates that when tasks are undertaken by a cohesive team aligned with a common vision, the necessity for direct supervision diminishes. Such teams develop the capacity to independently recruit additional members to execute shared objectives, driven by a unified understanding of the overall mission.

Notably, the philosophy of Ubuntu—which translates to "I am because we are"—resonates deeply with people-oriented leadership. Ubuntu promotes the idea that individual success is only meaningful when it benefits the collective. Leaders who embrace Ubuntu foster environments where employees feel valued, understood, and respected, creating a strong sense of unity and shared purpose. This philosophy urges leaders to prioritise empathy, collaboration, and the well-being of the community over individual gain, reinforcing the idea that leadership is a communal effort

Collaboration and Shared Leadership Through Ubuntu

This leadership approach clearly promotes collaboration within the organisation, where no one exerts undue power over others, thus avoiding negative impacts on performance. When collaboration is explained, it is often referred to as teamwork, but at a more advanced level, which includes benefits such as skills development, accelerated solutions, increased efficiency, and enhanced satisfaction (Fapohunda, 2013). A collective responsibility grounded in a shared vision ensures that decisions are binding on the entire group, even for those who were not present when the decision was made. This is crucial because collaboration increases shared leadership (Kumari, 2014). When everyone is involved, mutual respect develops because the common goal is clear to all. If done correctly, trust builds within the group, and people become open about their qualities. This helps leaders to identify and harness those qualities to benefit the organisation.

Ubuntu further strengthens the concept of shared leadership by emphasizing the value of trust, mutual respect, and collective progress. Leaders who practice Ubuntu ensure that all voices are heard, that every individual has an opportunity to contribute, and that decisions reflect the well-being of the entire team rather than individual ambitions. By fostering a culture of inclusivity and cooperation, Ubuntu enriches leadership dynamics, ensuring that success is truly shared.

People-oriented leadership thrives when collaboration, mutual respect, and shared purpose drive organisational success. The philosophy of Ubuntu profoundly enhances this model, promoting empathy, interconnectedness, and collective well-being. Leaders who embrace Ubuntu recognize that individual success is inseparable from collective progress, creating spaces where teamwork flourishes, humility shapes decisions, and shared purpose defines leadership excellence. As leadership continues to evolve, integrating Ubuntu ensures that organisations cultivate environments where every individual feels valued, respected, and empowered to contribute to a unified vision.

The Role of Governance and Strategic Planning in Church Sustainability

Church sustainability requires a holistic approach that addresses factors such as member participation, declining attendance, spiritual well-being, and infrastructure maintenance. This raises an important question: Does governance and strategic management enhance church sustainability, or should faith alone suffice? Scholars present conflicting viewpoints. Ballor (2014:119–123) argues that governance and strategy are unnecessary, asserting that the sovereignty of God guides the church, as demonstrated by the early church's reliance on faith and the Holy Spirit rather than structured systems. Conversely, Cho (2020:39–45) contends that strategy is inherently biblical, reflecting divine governance in God's interactions with humanity entrusting mankind with dominion over creation as an act of divine leadership.

Ubuntu, an African philosophical framework, enriches this discourse by emphasizing communal governance, ethical leadership, and collective responsibility in sustaining religious institutions. Rather than viewing governance as separate from faith, Ubuntu fosters a leadership model rooted in shared accountability, ensuring churches thrive through mutual empowerment, participation, and stewardship. In contrast to centralized leadership models, Ubuntu encourages inclusive decision-making, allowing congregations to critically engage with governance while maintaining theological integrity.

Principles of Good Governance and Their Role in Church Sustainability
Establishing and Implementing Good Governance inspired by Ubuntu

Effective governance is anchored in core principles that ensure an organization's long-term stability, ethical stewardship, and communal well-being. These principles, like transparency, accountability, ethical leadership, inclusive decision-making, and compliance with legal and

regulatory requirements, form the foundation for sustainable institutions. However, governance is not merely about structure; Ubuntu, the African philosophy emphasizing interconnectedness and collective responsibility, underscores that ethical leadership thrives when it fosters trust, cohesion, and shared prosperity. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015), the following pillars are essential for good governance, and Ubuntu enriches them by prioritizing communal engagement, shared wisdom, and participatory leadership:

Transparency and Accountability in Church Governance Inspired by Ubuntu

Transparency and accountability are fundamental pillars of ethical governance, ensuring leadership remains open, answerable, and committed to communal trust. Within the Ubuntu philosophical framework, these principles are reinforced by interconnectedness, communal responsibility, and mutual respect, where leaders serve not as individual authorities but as stewards of the collective good. Ubuntu's belief that "I am because we are" emphasizes that leadership must be participatory, fostering an environment where congregants feel included, valued, and engaged in decision-making. When transparency prevails, congregants develop a deep sense of belonging, ensuring continuous support and participation (Transparency International, 2020).

In a church governance context, transparency is essential in preventing leadership from becoming authoritarian or disconnected from congregants. Leaders must openly communicate decisions and remain accountable for their actions, allowing congregants to engage critically and meaningfully. Kretzschmar (2002:47–49) argues that church members who lack theological education or administrative training are often vulnerable to manipulation and unable to question leadership practices or advocate for ethical governance. To avoid this, churches must empower congregants through inclusive leadership models, reinforcing trust and strengthening communal participation (Transparency International, 2020).

By embracing Ubuntu, the church can cultivate a leadership culture rooted in shared responsibility, where accountability is collective rather than hierarchical. Ethical governance becomes not only a structural necessity but also a moral imperative, ensuring churches remain sustainable, transparent, and resilient in an evolving world.

Ethical Leadership in Church Governance Inspired by Ubuntu

Ethical leadership rooted in honesty, integrity, and moral responsibility is a fundamental pillar of Ubuntu, the African philosophy emphasizing interconnectedness, communal stewardship, and shared responsibility. Leaders who practice ethical governance understand their role as custodians of the community, prioritizing the well-being of the congregation over personal interests. In a church setting, this leadership approach enhances institutional credibility, authority, and spiritual integrity, ensuring that governance aligns with the collective good rather than individual benefit (World Bank, 2021).

The Bible reinforces ethical leadership as an essential component of responsible governance. 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 describes church leaders as "managers in the household of God, underscoring the stewardship role entrusted to them. Ethical leaders do not dominate but serve, fostering a leadership culture based on accountability and participatory decision-making (Kretzschmar, 2002, p. 51). When power is shared rather than concentrated, churches flourish as sustainable institutions where members actively engage, fostering collective trust and long-term stability.

However, a lack of accountability can lead to authoritarian leadership structures that alienate congregants and hinder institutional progress. Ethical leadership grounded in Ubuntu ensures that decisions prioritise community empowerment, reinforcing the belief that "I am because we are. By strengthening moral governance, churches create a leadership model that sustains trust, fosters inclusivity, and upholds spiritual integrity, ensuring resilience in a rapidly evolving world (World Bank, 2021).

Inclusive Decision-Making in Church Governance Inspired by Ubuntu

In the spirit of Ubuntu, decision-making should embrace inclusivity, ensuring that diverse voices contribute to shaping policies and directives. Ubuntu teaches that wisdom is collective, reinforcing the belief that leadership should not be monopolized but shared among all members of the congregation. When inclusivity is prioritized, individuals feel valued and empowered, deepening their commitment to communal growth and participation (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018).

A well-governed church fosters critical engagement, enabling congregants to participate in governance rather than merely follow directives. However, when congregational empowerment is absent, members may feel intimidated or hesitant to question leadership (Kretzschmar, 2002:47–49). Ubuntu-driven governance shifts this dynamic by encouraging dialogue, fostering unity, and strengthening the church's communal foundation. By ensuring inclusive decision-making, church leadership nurtures collective responsibility, reinforcing a sustainable and resilient institution that thrives through shared wisdom and active participation (UNDP, 2018).

Legal and Regulatory Compliance in Church Governance Inspired by Ubuntu

Churches operate within broader societal structures and must comply with legal and regulatory standards to maintain credibility, stability, and long-term sustainability. Adherence to these laws reinforces Ubuntu's principles of interconnectedness, communal respect, and ethical governance, ensuring that religious institutions contribute to a just and harmonious society (World Bank, 2019). Beyond legal compliance, Ubuntu emphasizes continuity and shared responsibility, particularly in leadership transitions. Presbytery (2019:n.p) highlights that poorly managed transitions can destabilize even well-governed churches. Without structured succession plans, progress may be disrupted, weakening institutional resilience. Mentorship programs that facilitate smooth leadership transitions align with Ubuntu's commitment to collective wisdom and stewardship, ensuring churches retain their vision while adapting to evolving challenges. By embracing Ubuntu-driven governance, churches can strengthen ethical leadership, maintain legal integrity, and uphold shared accountability, ensuring their sustainability within society (World Bank, 2019).

Governance and Management in Church Sustainability Guided by Ubuntu

Though distinct, governance and management complement each other in ensuring organizational stability and sustainability. Governance establishes guiding principles, while effective management ensures their practical implementation. A thriving church requires strategic planning, financial stewardship, human resource management, and program execution to function efficiently (OECD, 2015).

While governance defines overarching ethical and operational frameworks, management translates them into action. Without sound management practices, even the strongest

governance structures risk inefficiency and decline. The Bible frequently references management, affirming its significance in leadership, planning, and organizational success. Matthew 24:45 states, *"A faithful and sensible servant is one whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his other household servants and feeding them,"* while 1 Timothy 3:5 asserts, *"But if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?"* These passages emphasize that leadership is not solely spiritual but also requires practical managerial competence.

Ubuntu enriches this governance model by fostering collective responsibility, shared leadership, and ethical stewardship. Leaders act as custodians, ensuring communal participation in decision-making rather than exercising hierarchical control (Oosthuizen, 2015, p. 554). The Greek term Oikonomos, meaning household manager, reinforces the church leader's role as a steward, overseeing key administrative responsibilities for the collective good. By integrating Ubuntu-driven governance into church management, leaders cultivate accountability, inclusivity, and sustainable leadership, ensuring long-term institutional resilience rooted in ethical engagement and shared wisdom.

Strategic Planning Through the Lenses of Ubuntu

Strategic planning involves defining a clear vision and mission that align with both long-term and short-term goals. The philosophy of Ubuntu underscores the importance of collective purpose, reminding church leaders that planning should be inclusive and beneficial to the entire congregation. A well-structured strategic plan ensures that decisions uphold the values of shared prosperity and communal upliftment (UNDP, 2018).

Strategic planning ensures that the church maintains a clear vision and mission aligned with both long-term and short-term objectives. The Bible presents examples of strategic management, including Nehemiah's rebuilding of Jerusalem, which required resources, coordination, and skilled individuals. According to Rainey (2009:19), management skills and principles are essential for ensuring churches remain functional institutions where people unite to achieve shared goals. The interdisciplinary nature of Ubuntu reinforces the importance of collective planning and leadership, ensuring sustainable church management (UNDP, 2018).

Financial Stewardship Grounded in Ubuntu

Churches often receive financial contributions from donors to fund various projects. Responsible financial management—including budgeting, fundraising, and expense tracking—promotes transparency and ethical financial practices. In alignment with Ubuntu, financial stewardship must not only ensure sustainability but also emphasize generosity and collective well-being. Proper stewardship fosters trust among congregants and donors, reinforcing the importance of shared responsibility and ethical resource management (World Bank, 2021).

Financial stewardship is critical for sustaining churches and their outreach programs. Churches often receive contributions from donors and must handle these funds responsibly to maintain trust and transparency. The absence of basic financial management principles in theological education presents challenges for ministers who are required to manage church finances without formal training (Hendriks, 2004, p. 23). The church must integrate disciplines such as law, economics, and management into theological curricula to equip leaders with essential financial skills (World Bank, 2021).

Human Resource Management Anchored on Ubuntu

Church communities consist of individuals with diverse skills acquired from their professions. The principles of Ubuntu emphasize the significance of shared knowledge and communal upliftment. By recognizing and utilizing the talents within the congregation, church leaders strengthen operational efficiency and empower members. Skilled individuals should mentor others, fostering an environment where communal growth and sustainability are prioritized (OECD, 2015). Churches require diverse skills and expertise to function efficiently. The Ubuntu philosophy underscores the importance of collective empowerment, advocating mentorship programs in which experienced members train and guide others. Churches that fail to leverage their congregants' skills risk inefficiency and missed opportunities for growth. Oosthuizen (2015:558) highlights that ministers often lack contemporary management training, resulting in difficulties navigating the complexities of church administration (OECD, 2015).

Program and Event Management Informed by Ubuntu Ideals

Churches thrive when they organize programs that engage congregants socially and educationally. Events designed to uplift and empower individuals reflect the spirit of Ubuntu,

which encourages communal development and collective care. Through well-managed initiatives, churches create vibrant and connected communities, reinforcing their role as nurturing institutions for spiritual and societal growth (UNDP, 2018). Church programs must be effectively managed to foster inclusivity and engagement. Hendriks (2004:69) proposes a multidisciplinary approach to theology that integrates societal issues that directly affect church members into theological education. Churches must develop structured programs that respond to social, political, and environmental changes to ensure their continued relevance within communities. Poor management can lead to unsustainable church initiatives, reinforcing dependency rather than empowerment (UNDP, 2018).

Governance, Economic Challenges and Ethical Leadership in Church Sustainability through Ubuntu

While faith remains central to the church's mission, governance plays a pivotal role in addressing financial and economic challenges, ensuring institutional resilience. Crosby highlights the intrinsic connection between the church and economics, underscoring the necessity of analyzing why some churches thrive while others decline. Self (2012:n.p.) advocates for strategic ecclesiological economics to enhance church sustainability, reinforcing the idea that practical management must complement spiritual leadership. However, governance in certain Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe has faced challenges, as noted by West and Zech (2008:105). These churches often prioritize preaching while neglecting critical aspects of ministry, such as Diakonia—the church's social and charitable responsibilities. Economic struggles further exacerbate poor resource management, limiting churches' ability to carry out community-centred initiatives, a core aspect of Ubuntu's emphasis on collective well-being and shared prosperity.

One of the greatest concerns in church governance is integrity. Ethical leadership is fundamental to sustainable governance, requiring consistency in moral principles across all spheres of life. However, leadership failures have led to widespread disillusionment among congregants, diminishing trust in church institutions. Corruption—particularly in Nigeria—illustrates this crisis, as many perpetrators of ethical violations are Christians expected to uphold principles of integrity (Adeyemo, 2009, p. 63). Ubuntu's emphasis on accountability and interconnectedness calls for leaders who serve the community, reinforcing ethical governance by prioritizing trust, transparency, and shared leadership.

The issue extends beyond Africa, affecting church institutions globally. Nations led by Christian leaders continue to struggle with governance, highlighting deficiencies in moral integrity within church structures. Despite governance frameworks in African nations such as Kenya—where the constitution explicitly emphasizes transparency, integrity, and accountability (Barine & Minja, 2014, p. 55)—church leadership frequently fails to meet these expectations. To bridge this gap, Ubuntu-driven governance models advocate for participatory leadership, ensuring that decision-making processes foster ethical stewardship and empower congregants. By integrating Ubuntu's communal approach, churches can strengthen financial accountability, leadership integrity, and sustainable management practices, ensure long-term viability while maintain their spiritual mission.

Ethical Leadership, Governance, and Financial Stewardship in Church Sustainability Inspired by Ubuntu

Ethical leadership is essential for church sustainability, as Adeyemo (2009:63) argues, noting that intellectual and moral bankruptcy stifles organizational progress. Leadership choices ultimately shape the success or failure of an institution, reinforcing the need for consistent ethical stewardship. Barine and Minja (2014:69) emphasize that strong governance fosters institutional growth, while weak systems lead to collapse. As a moral institution, the church must set an example in combating corruption (Marquette, 2010). Ubuntu's emphasis on integrity, interconnectedness, and communal accountability aligns with this moral obligation, reinforcing collective responsibility in leadership. Wong and Page (2003:15) argue that church governance should embody Christ's leadership principles, fostering transparent, servant-oriented leadership rooted in trust, humility, and communal guidance.

The administration of church resources, particularly finances, hinges on trust and accountability. Mason (2009:36) emphasizes the importance of systems that safeguard financial stewardship, ensuring that church funds are managed responsibly. Paul's exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 2:12 urges believers to live lives worthy of God, reinforcing the necessity of accountability in church leadership (Mills, 2009, p. 245). By integrating Ubuntu-driven governance, churches can cultivate ethical leadership models that prioritize collective wisdom, financial transparency, and responsible stewardship, ensuring long-term sustainability and integrity.

Governance Strategies for Church Sustainability from an Ubuntu Perspective

Unlike corporate organizations, churches traditionally lack standardized performance measures to assess sustainability. However, Kenyan churches have begun implementing governance strategies aligned with long-term sustainability goals (Obwoge, 2006, p. 77%). These efforts demonstrate the growing recognition that structured leadership practices play a critical role in ensuring church resilience and continued growth. Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Kungu identifies unsupportive leadership cultures as key obstacles to effective church governance, while Otieno (2012:45) highlights inefficiencies in governance structures as barriers to sustainable progress. Churches struggling with governance failures often lack participatory leadership models, reinforcing hierarchical decision-making that alienates congregants and hinders institutional development. Integrating Ubuntu principles can help churches overcome governance inefficiencies. Ubuntu-driven leadership fosters inclusive decision-making, ensuring that governance structures are not dictated by a few but shaped collectively by the entire congregation. By embracing transparent leadership models, churches can strengthen accountability, strategic planning, and long-term sustainability, creating thriving religious institutions that uphold both spiritual and ethical integrity.

Theoretical Framework

The Ubuntu Theory

The researcher applied the philosophical theory of Ubuntu as a governance approach. Ubuntu is a concept deeply rooted in African philosophy, emphasising interconnectedness, community, and shared humanity. It embodies principles such as hospitality, humanness, and humility, encapsulated in the Zulu phrase *"Umntu ngumntu ngabantu"*, which translates to "a person is a person through other people." This philosophy underscores the idea that individual identity and success are intrinsically linked to the well-being and contributions of the broader community. The researcher acknowledged that although resources were often scarce, they needed to be utilised communally, as advocated by the Ubuntu philosophy. Ubuntu promotes collective responsibility, ensuring that resources are distributed equitably and used for the benefit of all community members.

This approach contrasts sharply with individualism, which prioritises personal gain over communal welfare. The misuse of resources, driven by self-interest and disregard for the community's needs, directly opposes the essence of Ubuntu. Ubuntu also fosters a sense of

moral obligation and empathy, encouraging leaders to prioritise the collective good over individual ambitions. It serves as a guiding framework for ethical leadership, emphasising the importance of collaboration, mutual respect, and shared decision-making. By applying Ubuntu as a theoretical framework, the researcher examined how leaders managed resources at their disposal, ensuring that their actions aligned with the principles of fairness, inclusivity, and communal benefit (Hodgson, 1996, p. 38). Furthermore, Ubuntu extends beyond human relationships to encompass a harmonious coexistence with the environment. It recognises the interconnectedness of all living beings and the need for sustainable practices that benefit both present and future generations. This philosophy has been historically applied in African communities to manage limited resources effectively, ensuring that everyone feels a sense of belonging and derives benefit from what is available.

In the context of governance, Ubuntu provides a lens through which leaders can address challenges by fostering unity, promoting transparency, and ensuring that decisions reflect the community's collective interests. It offers a transformative approach to leadership, inspiring leaders to act as stewards of communal well-being rather than as individuals seeking personal advantage.

Methodology

The research method was qualitative, as the study did not involve extensive numerical data that would require a quantitative approach. Instead, the research focused on gathering rich, descriptive insights from key informants representing two different denominations. These informants participated in interviews, answering questions and sharing their experiences. Additionally, an online questionnaire was distributed to 44 participants, containing simple yes-or-no questions, some of which assessed the effectiveness of certain aspects. By combining interviews with the questionnaire, the study captured both detailed personal experiences and broader perspectives, enhancing the depth and relevance of the findings. This approach resonates with the Ubuntu philosophy, which values the voices and lived experiences of individuals as part of a collective whole. By engaging both leaders and congregants, the study honoured the principle that wisdom and understanding emerge through dialogue and mutual respect. The qualitative method allowed for the expression of communal narratives, reinforcing the belief that leadership and governance are not isolated functions but shared responsibilities rooted in relational ethics.

This study was qualitative in nature, focusing on data derived from historical sources such as books, journals, and publications. Additionally, it incorporated secondary data collected directly from participants, including their opinions, views, and life experiences regarding church leadership. The participants consisted of leaders from two selected churches in South Africa—the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church—each offering unique perspectives on governance and management within the South African context. The research design aimed to identify patterns and differences among the key informants interviewed, contributing to a deeper understanding of church practices.

Straus and Corbin (1998:11) described qualitative research as a method that produces conclusions not solely reliant on statistical or quantitative approaches. This perspective aligned with the study's purpose of investigating governance and its role in ensuring a sustainable church.

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach. Johnson et al. (2007) defined mixed-methods research as "the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (p.123). The quantitative component of this approach included structured questions, while the qualitative component explored research participants' subjective and personal experiences.

The study utilised key informants, including three leaders from the Methodist Church and three from the Presbyterian Church. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, the research achieved a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation. As Creswell (2014) emphasised, "This form of research is more than simply collecting both quantitative and qualitative data; it indicates that data will be integrated, related, or mixed at some stage of the research process" (p.7).

Incorporating Ubuntu into the research design meant recognizing that leadership is not merely a position but a relational practice grounded in community values. The study acknowledged that church governance must reflect the interconnectedness of its members, where decisions are informed by empathy, shared purpose, and collective wisdom. The mixed-methods approach mirrored Ubuntu's holistic view of knowledge—embracing both the measurable and the meaningful, the individual and the communal.

The research was conducted in South Africa, within the Gauteng Province. It was not confined to a specific area, as the key informants were dispersed across various locations throughout the province. This geographic diversity enriched the study by capturing a broader spectrum of experiences and perspectives, reflecting Ubuntu's emphasis on inclusivity and the value of diverse voices within a shared human community.

Experts describe the target population as the group of individuals from which a sample is drawn to gather measurements (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). In this study, the target population consisted of six key informants representing two denominations. These informants were individuals holding high-ranking positions within the church hierarchy. Additionally, 44 regular congregants, who did not hold any official positions within the church, completed questionnaires with yes-or-no responses. However, the interviews focused exclusively on the key informants to gain in-depth insights into their experiences and perspectives.

By including both leaders and lay members, the study embraced Ubuntu's principle that every person's voice matters and contributes to the collective understanding. Leadership, in this context, was not viewed in isolation but as a role deeply embedded in community relationships. The inclusion of congregants affirmed the belief that "a person is a person through other persons," and that sustainable church governance must be informed by the lived realities of all its members.

The investigation was conducted in two churches, employing a consistent approach to ensure the research provided credible and reliable information. Cooper and Schindler (2003) emphasised that selecting a sample from a population, rather than including every individual, minimised financial and logistical constraints while maintaining research quality. In line with this principle, the study focused on two denominations—the Methodist and Presbyterian churches—from which congregation leaders were targeted as participants.

The study utilised both questionnaires and interviews as data collection tools. A total of 22 questionnaires were distributed in each denomination. This approach provided quantitative insights into how leadership influenced church sustainability. In addition, three interviews were conducted in each denomination, one per congregation, involving the ministers in charge. These interviews offered a deeper qualitative perspective, capturing nuanced understandings of leadership dynamics and decision-making processes within the churches.

The population of each denomination was estimated at an average of 100 congregants per congregation. The sampling process included three congregations from each denomination, with leadership roles forming the basis for participant selection. This resulted in seven leaders completing the questionnaires in each congregation, alongside one interview with the minister in charge per congregation. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the selected participants were relevant to the research objectives and represented leadership positions that directly contributed to governance and management practices. The uniformity in the number of participants across the denominations was deliberately chosen to ensure the credibility and comparability of the data collected.

This sampling strategy was deeply aligned with the Ubuntu philosophy, which advocates for inclusivity, shared responsibility, and communal engagement. By intentionally involving leaders from both denominations and ensuring equal representation, the study embraced the Ubuntu principle that leadership is not an isolated function but a collective endeavour. The voices of those in governance were valued not only for their expertise but for their role within a broader relational network—affirming that sustainable leadership emerges from mutual respect, ethical collaboration, and a commitment to the well-being of the entire faith community.

Findings

Decline in Church Membership

The findings highlighted gaps in governance practices, particularly the financial burdens placed on congregants, which created divisions within the church and alienated economically disadvantaged members. The study revealed how governance decisions directly impacted inclusivity and community trust. By critically assessing governance practices in the Methodist and Presbyterian churches, the objective was successfully fulfilled.

Need for Mentorship and Youth Leadership Development

The exclusion of youth from leadership and decision-making processes was identified as a key challenge. This finding underscored the pressing need for mentorship programmes and youth leadership development initiatives to bridge this gap. By proposing practical solutions—such as gradually integrating young leaders and providing skills development opportunities—the study successfully fulfilled the objective of addressing leadership challenges and offering actionable recommendations.

Diminished Presence of Ubuntu in Churches

The decline in Ubuntu principles, such as generosity and compassion, revealed a weakening alignment between governance practices and the church's mission of fostering community well-being. This erosion negatively impacted church sustainability by alienating members and diminishing the church's ability to serve as a source of unity and support. By linking this finding to governance practices, the study demonstrated that good governance rooted in communal values could significantly enhance sustainability.

Impactful but Uneven Acts of Support

The findings revealed that while church support profoundly impacted some members positively, others experienced neglect due to social or economic disparities. This uneven distribution of care exposed gaps in management practices that hindered inclusivity and trust. The study fulfilled the objective by analysing how effective management—through equitable resource allocation and outreach—could enhance sustainability and ensure inclusivity.

Conclusion

The church, like any other institution, requires strong leadership and strategic planning to sustain its mission. Governance and ethical leadership determine its ability to thrive while fulfilling its primary responsibility, serving the people, as Jesus did. Integrating governance frameworks such as Ubuntu enhances leadership effectiveness, ensuring the church remains a pillar of society.

Adopting Ubuntu as a governance model, the church transcends its role as merely a place of worship and becomes a thriving, sustainable community grounded in ethical stewardship and shared vision. Ubuntu fosters participatory leadership, promotes communal support, and prioritizes transparency, ensuring that governance remains inclusive, accountable, and reflective of Christ's teachings.

Furthermore, Ubuntu strengthens relationships and reinforces moral values within the church. It encourages leaders to embrace servant leadership, mirroring Jesus' example of humility and compassion. As a result, the church becomes more resilient, adaptable, and deeply rooted in its mission to serve.

Integrating Ubuntu principles, the church guarantees long-term sustainability, allowing it to continue fulfilling its purpose for generations to come. A church led by these values remains a beacon of hope, unity, and spiritual nourishment in a community where faith and governance work hand in hand to uplift and inspire.

Recommendations

The need to Reinforce Inclusivity and Financial Accessibility

The church must adopt new approaches that alleviate the financial burdens placed on its congregants and ensure everyone feels valued and respected, regardless of their financial contributions. To sustain its operations, the church should explore alternative income streams beyond tithing, thereby reducing reliance on congregants' financial support. Additionally, it must reconsider hosting frequent events that require excessive resources, focusing instead on initiatives that align with its mission without straining resources unnecessarily. Creating a more inclusive environment is essential, where every member, irrespective of their financial status, has an equal voice in shaping the direction of the church. Inclusivity fosters a sense of belonging and ensures that the church genuinely represents the diverse needs and perspectives of its community.

Transparency in financial matters is equally critical. The church leadership should provide clear, accessible communication regarding financial decisions, including detailed reports on how funds are allocated and used. Such practices demonstrate accountability and stewardship, encouraging trust and a shared commitment among congregants. When members contribute financially with a clear understanding of how their money supports the church's mission, they feel more engaged and empowered. By adopting these measures, the church can strengthen its relationship with its members and fulfil its role as a beacon of hope and unity within the community.

Foster Leadership Mentorship and Development

Workshops must be specifically designed to train young people, equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective leadership. These workshops would not only introduce participants to the fundamentals of leadership but also provide hands-on experience and practical insights into how leadership operates within the church context. Through such training, young people can develop confidence and competence, ensuring they are well-prepared to assume leadership roles when the time comes. Additionally, a deliberate and intentional effort is needed to integrate young people into the leadership structures of the

church. This integration should begin gradually, offering young members opportunities to observe, participate, and contribute to decision-making processes. Such an approach ensures a seamless transition to leadership positions, fostering continuity and stability within the church. By empowering young individuals and ensuring that they feel valued and supported, the church strengthens its leadership base while encouraging a sense of belonging. A leadership model that embraces mentorship and inclusion benefits the church as a whole. It creates a vibrant, sustainable institution that bridges generational gaps while building a shared vision for the future.

Revive the Spirit of Ubuntu

The programs that once united the church with the broader community must be revived to restore the spirit of Ubuntu. Initiatives such as soup kitchens, which were once common in many churches, as well as targeted outreach programmes for specific groups like the youth, the elderly, or the poor, should be reintroduced. These projects have the potential to rebuild trust between the church and the communities it serves, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose. Furthermore, sermons should actively reflect the values and teachings of Ubuntu, emphasising how they align with governance practices and the principles of good stewardship. By incorporating these values into teachings, the church can inspire its congregation to embrace kindness, generosity, and mutual care, reinforcing its role as a pillar of both spiritual and societal well-being.

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