

## Leadership Quality and Moral Character as Determinants of Local Church Growth at Sebat Bett Gurage Kale Heywet Churches

### Authors

Asfaw Demisew <sup>(1)</sup>; Dinah Nyamai <sup>(2)</sup>; Alice Mambo <sup>(3)</sup>

Main author's email: [asfaw.demisew@aiu.ac.ke](mailto:asfaw.demisew@aiu.ac.ke)

(1.2.3) Africa International University, Kenya.

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the effects of leadership quality and moral character on the numerical and spiritual growth of local churches in the Sebat Bett Gurage Kale Heywet Church (SBGKHC) district. There is an apparent gap between the significant evangelistic potential of the Sebat Bett Gurage Kale Heywet Church (SBGKHC) and the relatively low numerical and spiritual growth of the local churches since their inception in 1949. The church operates in a socio-cultural environment that offers numerous possibilities for growth, but this has not been achieved to a satisfactory degree. This raises the question of whether there are shortcomings in leadership quality and moral character that hinder its effectiveness in fulfilling its responsibilities. This research was therefore conducted to examine the effects of leadership quality and moral character on the numerical and spiritual growth of local churches in the SBGKHC district. The research adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. Data was collected from twenty-five purposively selected participants through in-depth individual interviews, focus group discussions, and the analysis of relevant documents. The results suggest that leadership quality and moral character play a significant role in determining church growth. Traits such as integrity, spiritual maturity, accountability, and relational leadership contributed to the congregation's numerical and spiritual growth. On the other hand, deficiencies in these areas contributed to mistrust and limited the ministry's effectiveness. It can therefore be concluded that the key to sustained local church growth in the SBGKHC district will be the nurturing of responsible, God-fearing leaders. This report proposes training of leaders through mentoring and accountability programs that combine character building and leadership training.

**Key terms:** Determinants, leadership, leadership quality, local church growth, moral character.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The moral character of leaders has been identified as one of the primary determinants of organisational success and congregation vitality, especially within ecclesiastical contexts where leadership is innately ethical and theological in nature. The current literature has established that Christian leadership is essentially moral in nature since it encompasses ethical spirituality, ethical responsibility, and missional accountability (Banks & Ledbetter, 2023). While the normative and theoretical basis that links moral character as a critical motivator of activity in ecclesiastical environments is clear, there is a major gap when it comes to empirical measures to assess the link between moral character and church growth. Most research regarding the issue of church growth has predominantly used structures, programs, and context within a sociological and strategic framework to explain the phenomenon, but there has been little research done on the impact of moral character on both numerical and spiritual growth in churches (Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2020). Likewise, while it is known within the field of leadership that moral character, defined by characteristics such as integrity and humility, affects behaviour and decisions, the direct correlation between moral character and observable outcomes has not been theorised and empirically tested enough (Northouse, 2022; Lemoine et al., 2019).

Various approaches to leadership, including authentic, servant, and transformational leadership, continue to stress the importance of having a sense of inner morality, integrity, and service for others as key factors in motivating people and building their trust (Banks & Ledbetter, 2023 & Ferrell & Fraedrich, 2021; Sanders, 2029). The New Testament describes church leadership as a holistic ministry of the Gospel that encompasses shepherding, instruction, administration, and spiritual guidance. The scriptural requirements for leadership in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9 include blamelessness, sound doctrine, and ability in instruction and defending sound doctrine. These requirements clearly establish moral character and doctrinal purity as a sine qua non for leadership effectiveness. The scriptural description in Ephesians 4:11-12 portrays leadership as divinely appointed for equipping or enabling the body of Christ, which clearly describes a developmental or transforming function for leadership in churches. The moral character of leadership in a local church impacts congregational culture, member commitment, and overall effectiveness in missions' outreach. The leadership example in terms of integrity, humility, accountability, and spiritual maturity inspires member commitment and participation in a local church. There is, therefore, a critical need for contextually situated research that systematically examines how leadership's moral character functions as a determinant of both numerical and spiritual growth, thereby addressing the existing gap between theological assertion and empirical validation.

The Gurage evangelicals date back to 1949. Later, the Society of International Missionaries, with its office in Addis Ababa, began its work in the region in 1972, adding to the spread of evangelicals in the region. According to Belete (2000, pp. 267-270), they worked with schools and clinics for 3 years, and many people started to follow Christ. Kale Heywet Church (KHC) was the first evangelical church, established in 1949 (Belete, 2000, pp. 267-270). The Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church (EKHC) is one of the largest denominations in the country. It has twelve regional offices in the whole country. One of the regional offices is in the Southwest of the capital in Gurage. This regional office coordinates five district offices: Enemor KHC, Gumer KHC, Geto KHC, Cheha KHC, and Egha KHC with 95 local churches. The total number of members in Sebat Bett Gurage Kale Heywet Church (SBGKHC) is about twenty-five thousand.

The nature and quality of local church leadership are part and parcel of, and indeed the very foundation for, the growth and sustainability of any local church (Degefa, 2011, pp. 274-276, 104; Felose, 2005, 2006; Machel, 2006, p. 9). Leadership is not merely the authority vested in the position held by the individual, but the power and capacity to shape the attitudes and commitments of others and channelise the energies of the group in the direction desired by the leader. As Gebreyes (2018) points out, history is replete with compelling examples of the two-fold potential of leaders to build society toward advancement and progress or to cause havoc and destruction. Leaders at the local church level have the potential to cause the church to grow spiritually and numerically or to cause stagnation and decline.

Theological literature supports this correlation between leadership effectiveness and church growth (Felose, 2005, 2006; Wegu, 2007, p. 41). Poor leadership is a key contributor to local church contraction, while competent, moral, and visionary leadership is a key determinant of holistic local church growth. The early Christian church, as recorded in the book of Acts (Acts 2:41-42; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 13:48), provides a most impressive case study on how effective local church leadership can lead to the fulfilment of the Great Commission in evangelism and disciple-making. Indeed, under the leadership of the apostles, the early Christian church experienced tremendous growth because the apostles were committed to evangelism, teaching the Word of God, praying, etc. The apostolic focus on sound teaching was decisive in the success of missionary efforts and the replication of converts (Brant 2013, pp. xvi, 12).

The annual reports presented to the General Assembly of Sebat Bett Gurage Kale Heywet Church indicate that local churches in the region have not grown in proportion to the number of years of their existence (Sebat Bett Gurage Kale Heywet Church Leaders Conference Report, 2010). Most of the local churches in the SBGKHC region are subject to cycles of growth and degrowth. Local churches in the SBGKHC region have been in existence since 1949, but the impact of local church leadership on local church growth in the region has not been empirically examined. The need, therefore, to investigate the link between local church leadership and local church growth in the SBGKHC region cannot be overstated. Specially the research seeks to understand the link between the quality of leadership and the numerical and spiritual growth of local churches, ways in which moral character of the local church leaders affect the numerical and spiritual growth of local churches and contextually responsive leadership development strategies that could be implemented to strengthen leadership quality and moral character in ways that sustainably enhance both the numerical expansion and spiritual vitality of local churches.

Local churches within the SBGKHC district fail to fully exploit the available opportunities and resources. For example, the Enemor KHC, which was established in 1970, has 25 local churches, while the Egha church, which is only five years younger and was established in 1975, has 7 local churches. Similarly, the growth of the Gumer and Geto KHC is not commensurate with their age. These churches are located geographically close to each other and are faced with the same contextual setting. Competitors from the Muslim church are increasing faster compared to the local Christian churches. The Central Statistical Agency Census of 2007 indicated that Ethiopian Orthodox Christians comprised 41.02 per cent, Protestants 5.79 per cent, Catholics 1.12 per cent and Muslims 51.91 per cent of the population of Sebat Bett Gurage. Sadly, a 2017 report from Enemor Wereda represented a continuing trend: 61.26 per cent Muslims, 30.13 per cent Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, 7.39 per cent Protestants, and 1.1 per cent Catholics. This study, therefore, aimed to plug the highlighted crucial gaps by focusing on the link that exists between the dynamics of leadership and the development of the congregations. It was guided by three research questions.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership excellence and morality form crucial factors in the numerical growth and spiritual renewal of any local church community. Leadership is not simply an organisational activity but a complex phenomenon comprising spiritual leadership, ethical behaviour, doctrinal knowledge, interpersonal influence, and visionary direction (Malphurs & Mancini, 2004; Banks & Ledbetter, 2016). Herein lies the distinction between leadership excellence and leadership role, whereby the former combines morality, theology, relationships, and mission effectiveness to influence organisational health and direction. Local church leadership character in terms of integrity, humility, accountability, and servant leadership serves as the ethical basis of successful church ministry. Such leadership creates an atmosphere of trust, unity, and involvement in worshipping, discipling, and evangelising within the congregation in addition to providing the necessary legitimacy for the leader's role (Ukeni, 2026). The emphasis on authenticity and authentic leadership theory supports this approach by highlighting the importance of transparency, ethics, self-awareness, and relational openness in the process of leaders' influence over followers (Lux & Lowe, 2024; George, 2003; Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

Studies by researchers like Agazu et al. (2025) and Hidayah, T. (2025) demonstrate that transformational and systems-oriented leadership approaches are positively associated with organisational growth and performance outcomes, including innovation, employee engagement, and long-term sustainability. Judge & Piccolo (2004) and Plecas et al. (2018) associate transformational leadership dimensions such as vision casting, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration with increased organisational effectiveness and follower development. Within a local church context, these dynamics translate into stronger discipleship systems, improved governance, and enhanced adaptive capacity in changing socio-cultural environments. Conversely, leadership failures in vision clarity, governance, and relational integrity are consistently identified as contributing factors to stagnation and decline (Hopkins, 2008; Epp, 2024; Asifatu, 2022).

Leadership approaches presented in biblical texts imply a deliberate process of discipleship, teaching, and reproduction (Matt. 28:18-20; 2 Tim. 2:2), which underlines the pivotal role of leadership in determining the outcome of the church. Christ's servant model of leadership highlights the concept of greatness through humility and self-sacrificing service (Mark 10:43-45; Eph. 4:11-16). The Holy Spirit is responsible for growth while local church leaders offer guidance, direction, and management (Wagner, 1981, in Lilleorg et al., 2021; Ps. 127:1; Acts 2:42-47). Existing literature shows that the phenomenon of church growth at the local level should be treated as the result of an integrated approach, which includes dependence on the Holy Spirit, moral excellence, spirituality, and competency. There exists a consensus on the importance of these leadership dimensions, but there is still a lack of empirical research dedicated to their performance in indigenous churches and connection to growth metrics (Degefa, 2011).

### Leaders' Character and Church Growth

In the context of Christian leadership theory, character can be defined as a pattern of behaviour that manifests the divine qualities of God and is evident in the individual's private and public life (Degefa, 2011, p. 88). In such a perspective, there is a close relationship between leadership efficiency and morality because true leadership requires good character and emerges from it. Indeed, leadership power does not come from status or ability but from having good and ethical character (Munroe, 2006, pp. 115, 129). According to Felose (2005, p. 8), the problem in leadership in the Church may arise when leaders lack

proper moral character, and one reason for ecclesiastical issues lies in poor leadership. Literature further emphasises that leadership in the local church is inherently an ethical and behavioural responsibility that demands consistency between belief and conduct. Church leadership is understood as leading by example, where an exemplary life reflects godliness and serves as an essential dimension of ministerial responsibility (Degefa, 2011, pp. 1, 60). A disjunction between leadership service and personal life is therefore interpreted as hypocrisy and a fundamental failure of both the leader and the church system they represent (Degefa, 2011, p. 114). Leadership character is thus not an auxiliary trait but a defining condition of authentic Christian leadership.

Literature recognises the significance of the credibility of leaders as being gained through exemplary living, where words and actions go hand-in-hand. An exemplary leader becomes the most convincing means of communication, and his or her life becomes the greatest sermon preached through his or her daily life (Borthwick, 1990, pp. 22-23; Wegu, 2005). The Pauline theology, which regards holiness, righteousness, and blamelessness as the key components of ministry witness (1 Thessalonians 2:10), emphasises this argument. Leaders such as Martin Luther imitating Jesus Christ, the head of the church, exemplified the power of integrity in creating a lasting impact on people (Sanders, 2007, pp. 79-80). In sum, literature reveals that the character of leaders plays a significant role in fostering congregational trust and participation in ministry activities. Where leaders manifest integrity in their lives and practices, church expansion is evident; otherwise, weakness and lack of development will characterise organisations (Degefa, 2011, p. 114).

## **Exemplary Life of Leaders upon the Growth of Local Churches**

Exemplary living among Christian leaders serves as an illustration of the principles and doctrines taught in the Bible. This is referred to as “leadership by example:” According to Degefa (2011, pp. 1, 60), an exemplary life is characterised by godliness and constitutes an important aspect of ministry responsibility. In the case of Christian leaders, exemplary living implies consistency between the life of a leader in terms of serving the ministry and his or her personal life. Failure to do so may amount to hypocrisy, which constitutes an important weakness in leadership (Degefa, 2011, p. 114). Scholarly synthesis emphasises that leadership influence is most powerfully communicated through lived example. An exemplary life is regarded as the most persuasive form of leadership communication, often described as the “greatest sermon” a leader can deliver (Borthwick, 1990, pp. 22–23; Wegu, 2005). This principle is reinforced in Pauline ethical teaching, which presents holiness, righteousness, and blamelessness as visible standards of ministerial authenticity (1 Thess 2:10).

Theological teachings emphasise that congruence between leaders’ lives and preaching produces enduring impact and organisational sustainability. The life of Jesus Christ serves as the ideal paradigm of congruent leadership in which preaching and practice are one and the same. In the same way, reformational leadership illustrations show that integrity of life inspires loyalty, spiritual development, and organisational success (Sanders, 2007, pp. 79–80). Both literature and biblical teachings highlight that an exemplary life constitutes a crucial determinant in influencing church expansion, considering its role in promoting trust, fostering discipleship, and encouraging congregational involvement. On the contrary, incongruence between the leader's lifestyle and message adversely affects credibility and church expansion outcomes.

## **Perseverance on Persecution upon Growth of Local Churches**

According to the New Testament, suffering is one of the elements that cannot be separated from the Christian experience, and the leaders perceive that persecution plays a significant role in how they react to persecution and its effect on the growth and survival of churches (Tekle, 2015, p. 128). Jesus Christ's life and teachings offer a paradigm of redemptive suffering through rejection, suffering, and obedience to God's will (Kim, 2000, pp. 1, 33). Building on the legacy of Jesus Christ, early Christian leadership was marked by bold evangelistic efforts despite persecution, whereby preaching and witnessing the gospel often meant undergoing persecution and martyrdom (Brant, 2013, p. 12). According to Hefley (1979, p. 184), historically, persecution occurred during the growth phase of churches rather than during their decline.

In the case of Ethiopia, similar trends were observed. The death of the evangelists, like Steve, did not stop the church growth process but rather assisted it to become alive and even revitalise its growth. Rev. Gudina Tumsa of Ethiopian Evangelical Church Makana Yesus (EECMY), a renowned transformational leader, died, making the church identify more with theology and missions (Bekele, T., 2014, p. 170; Bekele, G., 2011, p. 359; Tasgara, 2005, p. 159). The leadership of such individuals awakened other leaders and enabled the continued growth of evangelicals in Ethiopia (Bekele, G., 2011, pp. 223-230, 364; Eshete, 2009, pp. 231-251). Further literature suggests that persecution that took place during the communist Derg regime surprisingly played a part in expanding the evangelical church in Ethiopia (Belete, 2000, p. 309).

## **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study employed an interpretive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and meanings participants ascribe to the role of leadership quality and moral character in local church growth. The design was selected because church growth is not only an observable phenomenon but also a deeply experienced and interpreted reality shaped by spiritual, relational, and moral dimensions (Abate, 2020, p.238 & Creswell, 2003, p.227). Interpretive phenomenology enabled the researcher to move beyond surface descriptions of leadership functions and examine how participants understand, experience, and interpret leadership influence in relation to spiritual formation, congregational trust, and church development. Through in-depth interviews and observational engagement, the study captured contextual and subjective realities, revealing the often-implicit ways in which leadership character and practice are perceived to shape both growth and stagnation within the church.

The target population of the research was 95 Sebat Bett Gurage Kale Heywet Churches (SBGKHC). The reason for this selection of the study areas was that the researcher has been serving as a leader in SBGKHC for more than 15 years in different responsibilities, and the role of leaders in this study area has never been studied (Creswell, 2009, p.35).

The research employed a purposive sampling strategy to select five local churches, one for each of the SBGKHC administrative five districts: Enemor Kale Heywet Church District Office (KHCD) with 29 local churches, Gumer (KHCD) with 25 local churches, Cheha (KHCD) with 23 local churches, Geta (KHCD) with 10 local churches, and Egha (KHCD) with eight local churches. The first established local church at Enemor, Bortene Local Kale Heywet Church (LKHC) has 450 members, the first established local church at Gumer, Mocheya (LKHC) has 500 members, the first established local church at Cheha, Yeweze (LKHC) has

400 members, the first established local church at Geta, Aytehmar (LKHC) has 220 members, and the first established local church at Egha, Yegobet (LKHC) has 250 members.

Five participants from each of the first local churches will be selected, a total of 25 participants. The five local churches were selected because they are old enough and have long experience in local church leadership. The respondents included five pioneers, five pastors, five evangelists, five women leaders, and five youth leaders, because they were believed to be information-rich.

An interview guide (appendix 1) with 14 questions guided the data collection. The first research question generated two interview questions. The second research question generated four interview questions. The third research question contains five interview questions, and the fourth research question has two interview questions. However, whenever there was a need for clarification of the information, participants were probed with more specific questions, such as "Would you tell me more about leaders' exemplary lives. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The first validation strategy is triangulation (Creswell, 2018, p. 314). Triangulation is a multi-method approach to cross-check the result of one approach by another. This includes space triangulation and "space triangulation attempts to overcome the limitations of studies conducted with in one culture or subculture" (Cohen et al., 2000, p.130). The responses from interviews of one district's informants will be validated by the responses of other districts' informants. An interview is one of the data collection strategies in this study. Cohen et al. (2000, p. 138) commented that an interview measure is validated by using another measure. In this study, the interview will be validated by document analysis. The response of pastors was validated by another local church pastor. The responses of one selected local church respondent will be validated by another selected local church respondent.

The second validation strategy is peer debriefing (Creswell, 2018, p. 315). This will be done with academic communities in the church. The third validation procedure is using "a rich, thick description to convey the findings" (Creswell, 2018, p. 315). The researcher will offer a thick description of the settings. The fourth validation strategy is clarifying "the bias the researcher brings to the study" (Creswell, 2018, p. 315). The fifth validation procedure, which presents "negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes", will be included in the final report (Creswell, 2018, p. 315). The sixth procedure is spending enough time in the field, as the data will be gathered (Creswell, 2018, p. 315). The last one is using an external auditor to debrief other than peers (Creswell, 2018, p. 315).

Acceptability will be determined by the satisfaction of the respondent, asking useful questions, and how they found it. Transparency will be publicised by making known the methods of the research. The respondents will receive their transcripts for review, and this will apply credibility. The trustworthiness of the data will be established by credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability.

One-on-one interviews with all 25 respondents took place in the places where they live, in the office of the local church or in the meeting hall. The pastor of the local church had the freedom to decide the place of the interview ahead of time. Each interview session took place within one and a half hours. Document analysis was included as the primary source of data for the study because sometimes "documents may be better in revealing the state of mind of participants at different contexts than interview" (Abate, 2020, p.

237). The documents included the annual report and minutes of the general assembly of local churches, which may have vivid reports about the role of leaders and church growth. Annual reports of those selected churches were observed regarding leaders' roles and church growth. The minutes of the general assembly of those local churches during the past five years, from 2020 to 2024, were analysed. The researcher looked for concepts about the role of leaders in church growth as well as reports on church growth, religious freedom, church planting, evangelism, discipleship, character and competence of a leader.

The researcher followed step-by-step Simple Thematic Analysis with six phases that are described by Nowell et al. (2017). First, the researcher read the notes and listened to the audio recordings and became familiar with the data to edit, transcribe and code. Next, the researcher generated initial codes for the statements and phrases and started colour coding. Thirdly, the researcher sought themes and sub-themes by using the codes. Fourthly, the researcher reviewed themes in each data collection to assess the amount of data to form a theme. Fifth, the researcher gave a definition and determined the scope of each theme. Finally, the researcher produced the report.

This research employed inductive manual coding methods to analyse the data because "the process is to generate new descriptions and conceptualizations" on the role of leaders in church growth (Abate, 2020, p. 238). Creswell stated it as this:

[The researcher inductively works] back and forth between the themes and the database until they establish a comprehensive set of themes. Then deductively, ---[they] look back at their data from the themes to determine if more evidence can support each theme or whether they need to gather additional information. Thus, while the process begins inductively, deductive thinking also plays an important role as the analysis moves forward (Creswell, 2018, p. 296).

Each participant was clearly informed about the purpose of the study, their expected role, and their rights before data collection commenced. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were further assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any form of coercion, as well as their right to decline answering any question they considered sensitive or inappropriate. Confidentiality and data protection were upheld throughout the research process. Although participants consented to the use of their names, all data was handled with care and securely stored to ensure ethical integrity and respect for their contributions.

## 4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All interviewed participants strongly emphasised that local church growth, both spiritual and numerical, is fundamentally shaped by the quality of its local church leadership and its moral character. They consistently argued that spiritual growth extends beyond participation in local church programs or acquisition of biblical knowledge and is better understood as the lived expression of God's will in daily conduct. Local church growth is therefore evidenced by transformed lifestyles, sustained obedience, and faithful Christian witness in ordinary life. Participants, however, observed a persistent inconsistency in congregational development, where some members demonstrate signs of maturity while others remain spiritually stagnant despite continuous teaching. This disparity was interpreted as evidence that instruction

alone is insufficient for transformation in the absence of leadership that embodies spiritual discipline, models accountability, and provides intentional pastoral follow-up.

The most dominant theme across all responses was the centrality of leadership moral character in shaping local churches' life and growth. All the 25 participants maintained that the character of local church leaders constitutes the moral foundation of leadership effectiveness and is directly responsible for levels of trust, followership, and public credibility. Leaders who demonstrate integrity, humility, and consistency were described as highly credible and influential, generating confidence within the congregation and strengthening the church's witness in the wider community. Conversely, moral inconsistency was viewed as severely damaging, undermining internal unity, weakening discipleship processes, and diminishing evangelistic effectiveness. In this way, leadership character was understood not merely as personal virtue but as "lived theology," through which the gospel is either authentically embodied or contradicted in practice.

Participants perceived leaders who remain faithful under pressure as key sources of congregational resilience, fostering perseverance and spiritual endurance among members. Such steadfastness was described as "contagious," strengthening collective identity and encouraging believers to remain committed despite adversity. Overall, leadership quality and moral character emerged as decisive, non-negotiable factors that shape spiritual maturity, reinforce community identity, and indirectly but powerfully contribute to sustainable church growth, as elaborated below.

## **Quality Leadership and Local Growth**

This research question frames leadership not as one ingredient among many, but as the one interpretive lens through which growth is understood and lived in the church. It further enables an understanding that leaders' visions, character, competencies, and daily practices have a much deeper impact on the church. The participants' stories give great insight into these dynamics.

Asnakech Argaw spoke about leadership structures, making it easier to follow up on discipleship. He emphasised that the organisation directly enables keeping in contact over time with Bible study and the rest of spiritual formation. Dejene Deneke stated that strong leaders give strong commitment to worship and said that leaders who really encourage people to show by example and motivate participation cause most of the congregation to be more devoted and stable in their attendance. In similar terms, Fitsum Shisema noted that relational and spiritual maturity is internalised through good leadership. He defined it as putting more emphasis on pastoral care and guidance accompanied by personal example, which leads members to develop deeper personal faith resilience. These examples collectively provide evidence, demonstrating that leadership is neither abstract nor merely structural, but a highly relational involvement as elaborated in the themes below:

## **Leadership as the Centrepiece Interpretive Frame for Growth**

Quality leaders remain the single main and decisive resource for local churches' growth. Tellingly, growth was not interpreted from either indication, not seen as automatic or organic outcomes, nor as dependent mainly on external social or economic conditions. Growth, whether spiritual or numerical, was seen through the flagpole, absence, or effect of leadership: leadership understood not merely as administrative

oversight, but as the direct result of being spiritual, theological and missional, affecting the way believers mature in faith and how churches engage with their communities.

Discipleship, biblical teaching, participation in worship, prayer life, living Christ-like, and perseverance under trial were only a few of the dimensions earmarked to define spiritual growth. On the contrary, the actors framed numerical growth in terms of evangelism, conversion, retention of members, youth participation, and church planting. Most narratives displayed persistent imbalances, though participants admitted that quality leadership ideally sponsors both dimensions equally well. On numerous occasions, churches exhibit little spiritual formation without outward expansion or, even less frequently, outward expansion without deep discipleship. Disjuncture formed tension at the core of the analysis of research question one.

## **Leadership and Spiritual Growth in the Local Church**

Most of the narrators define leadership as an influential aspect of spiritual growth through a proper arrangement of learning and worship practices. Asnakech Argaw stressed the leadership role in establishing structured opportunities for learning the Bible. The establishment of regular midweek Bible study was viewed as a direct contributor to spiritual growth among almost all the participants. Asnakech Argaw stated, "Yeah, we have a Bible study on Wednesday, and those who attend regularly grow in life." This argument affirmed the intent of leadership while at once recognising that participation is uneven. Her words suggest leadership provides the structure for growth, but change is not universal. Implicit questions regarding follow-up, accountability, and relational discipleship arise in the background. Dejene Deneke also agreed that it is leadership that constructs worship discipline and commitment among the congregation. As he puts it, haphazard church attendance, almost exclusively limited to holidays as opposed to regular Sunday attendance, negatively affects church growth. Dejene Deneke's narration demonstrates local church leadership's inability to change norms and expectations of the congregation. Leadership, in this sense, champions both cultural and spiritual aspects, influencing how faith is modelled in a weekly manner.

Fitsum Shisema recognised internalised spiritual development, but he added some severe limits: There is some spiritual growth, but there is not much growth in numerical aspects at the same time. There is growth in spirituality, but the number growth is minimal. Leadership seems to do quite well in terms of helping members stay active and nourished, but not mobilised outwardly. Furthermore, his statement raises questions about whether leadership sees spiritual growth primarily as internal edification rather than as mission preparation.

## **Concerns About the Depth and Authenticity of Spiritual Growth**

Although some participants praised the role of leadership in developing spiritual exercises, a good number of participants voiced apprehensions about the growth of leadership in the depth, consistency, and authenticity of that growth. Using theological critique, Chernet Tesfaye comments that leadership has not fully differentiated Christian discipleship from simple religiosity. He remarked, "Some think that our faith is like any religion... only a few have a Christ-centred life." Chernet Tesfaye's critique isn't about the presence of some form of faith practice, but rather about the absence of a faith practice that results in a transformed identity. This leads us to conclude that religious leadership, in this case, is possibly holding the religious

framework, structures, and practices of faith while ignoring the gap in developing the depth of Christ-centred discipleship.

By focusing on the absence of depth and resilience in the lives of the believers, Hiwot Mulugeta extended this critique. She explains, "Spiritual growth is not ok... Few pass-through persecutions and their lives are shaped." Her reference to persecution and suffering illustrates a particular theological interpretation of discipleship, which entails perseverance and the willingness to pay the price. Hiwot Mulugeta's narrative pointed to the absence of leadership that is adequately envisioning and equipping believers to withstand the rigours of faith in difficult situations, which is ultimately leading to a shallow and brittle spirituality. Collectively, these critiques suggest that although leadership has been put in place.

## **Leadership and Numerical Growth: Evangelism, Conversion, and Expansion**

When participants talked about more members showing up, most pointed right at what the leaders were doing on purpose and how focused they were on the mission. Bewketu Naji probably spells this out better than anyone else. He said, "There is number growth... About 27 participants got straight to the point by adding, "Leaders are obedient to do evangelism." For them, it is not about planning things perfectly or having a ton of resources; they see the real reason for more people as just sticking to what they believe they are supposed to do. Leaders take sharing their faith seriously, and everyone else seems to pick up on that.

Assefa Aytehmar pretty much said the same thing, but talked more about leaders starting new churches. He put it like this: "Planting churches is the strategy of leaders. They follow up with the members." If you look at his story, you see leadership isn't just about keeping things running; it's about actually reaching out and growing beyond one local church, really trying to build something bigger. He kept coming back to following up with people, so it is clear leaders there do not just kick things off and walk away; they stick around and make sure folks are taken care of.

Haile Agza Aytehmar saw growth through a long lens; he zoomed out across decades when talking about what happened. After thinking back over thirty years of ministry, he shared, "We were about seven... now in the past thirty years we planted six other churches." That puts growth into a different light: for him, it stacks up slowly from one generation to another instead of happening all at once overnight. In his mind, how well leaders did their jobs over many years was about keeping at it and seeing results pile up little by little as time went by.

## **Stagnation, Decline, and Leadership Limitations**

Despite these positive accounts, a good number of the participants talked about numbers staying pretty much the same or even going down. Asnakech Argaw did not hide her frustration when she said, "I do not think as expected." She was pointing straight at those hopes that just haven't matched up with what is really happening. Cheru Ture dug into this stuck feeling, saying, "Nowadays the growth of numbers is limited... it is very small." He was not just talking about things moving slowly; it sounded like he did not see much on the horizon either. Mekdes Haile gave maybe the bluntest take: "There are no more new converts. It is indeed cold." That word cold just landed hard. It makes you feel how things have cooled off spiritually, and you get this picture of people running through motions instead of caring about spreading

their faith or getting anyone new involved. With his story, leadership seems more about keeping habits alive than firing people up for something bigger.

## **Integrated Patterns of Spiritual and Numerical Growth**

When you look at everyone's stories together, it is obvious that things are not moving forward the same way for everybody under the current leadership all over the place. Mikru Gizaw did not sugarcoat it: "There is growth, but it is not as expected... some grow spiritually, some do not." He pointed out that within different groups, there isn't a clear pattern; some people get a lot out of it, others barely budge.

Nesru Moshaga ties this slowdown to people just not caring as much anymore. In his words: "The growth is not like before... people are not motivated." Basically, he sees leaders having a tough time keeping folks fired up or pushing things forward year after year. Selam Habte did not mince words about what is happening: he asserted, "These days, the number of converts is almost none." Then there are voices like Mikru Gizaw, Nesru Moshaga, and Netsanet, who all brought up something else: the number of young people leaving. Nobody talked about these problems as though young people were just facts of life. What came through was that leadership has not really kept up or found new ways to handle shifts in the dynamics of who makes up their congregations.

## **Leadership Contributions and Persistent Gaps**

Despite all the worries, most participants admitted there had been some real leadership that mattered. Sisay and Tadele Gebere both talked about how some leaders were getting involved in teaching and training, which, honestly, had made a big difference for people trying to get what the Bible is saying. Shikur Gibaga brought up how church leaders spend time with the community and said that it was helping local churches' holistic life in a way that people notice. You hear repeatedly everyone saying their leaders are committed to carrying out the Great Commission, even though it was not always something every local church saw played out day-to-day.

There was, however, another side to things; plenty of participants pointed out major problems with how things run during leadership selection. Mikru Gizaw did not hold back; he thought picking leaders mostly because they are older (instead of whether they're really any good or spiritually ready) just sets everyone back. Tadele Habte talked about systems that barely keep track of what is happening, so nobody is held responsible when things go wrong. Netsanet pointed out how everything seemed to be turning into paperwork and chasing after stuff instead of focusing on spiritual life as it should. And Yohannes just said it straight: evangelism isn't high anymore, and leaders are starting to focus more on themselves than reaching out.

## **Integrated Summary**

Taking all the data from research question one into consideration, quality leadership indeed is the main determinant of spiritual and numerical growth of local churches. This is a conclusion clearly supported not only by the voices of participants but also by empirical studies. Participants like Asnakech Argaw and Dejene Deneke share how regular Bible study and committed worship, instituted by leadership, contribute to observable spiritual growth within the congregation. Asnakech affirms, "Yes, we have a Bible study on Wednesday. Those who attend grow in life," and Dejene talked of an increase in Sunday attendance and people's attention under new leadership practices. These kinds of stories concur with researchers like

Shaasha (2025), who demonstrated that servant leadership and empowerment significantly relate to spiritual growth in Pentecostal churches, with servant leadership practices considerably enriching discipleship and community building.

The link between leadership and spiritual growth is supported in general research, which suggests that ethical, relationship-focused, and authenticity-driven models of leadership inspire congregants towards higher levels of unity and spiritual involvement. A study of authenticity in church settings in Kenya indicated that transparency, morality, and ethics-assured models of church leaders generate congregational trust that, in turn, strengthens congregational involvement and growth (Nzinga & Kimathi, 2025). Chernet Tesfaye perceived the lack of Christ-centred living among congregants because of poor leaders and a lack of discipleship, a sentiment supported in the literature, indicating that integrity-driven and self-aware models of church leadership make a critically important difference regarding congregational adoption and practice of faith.

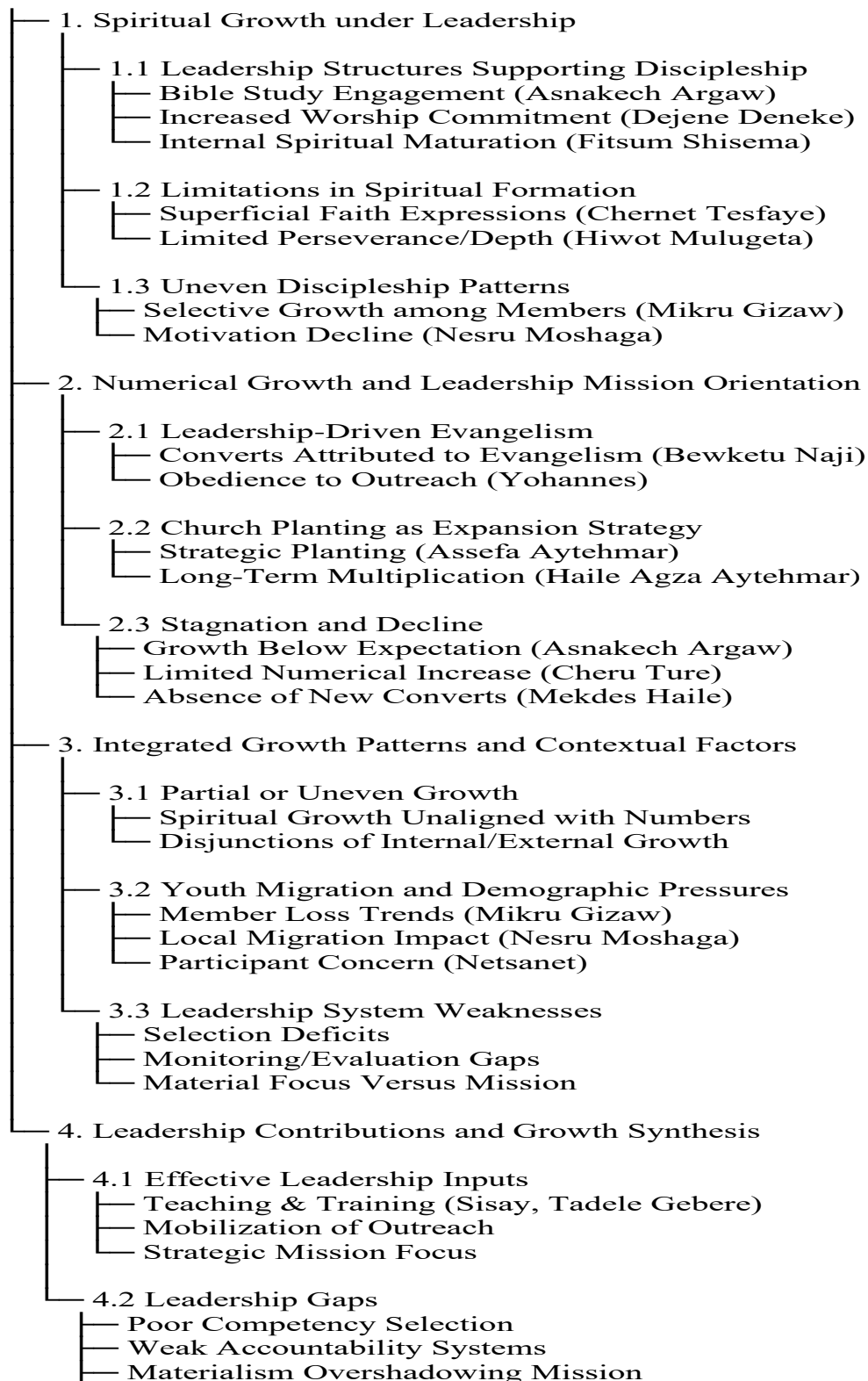
Several participants underscored a continued mismatch between internal development and expansion on the outside. Fitsum Shisema stated, "There is spiritual growth, but the numerical growth is not there. Her observation sums up a church growth theory: "Spiritual vitality and numerical growth simply do not necessarily go hand in hand." Theorists like Rick Warren, in his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, argue that without strategic focus on integrating missionally, there is a risk that churches cannot foster great spiritual depth without living out the "Great Commission". Participants documenting "numbers growth," for example, Bewketu Naji and Assefa Aytahmar, and more, underscored evangelical obedience and church planting as fundamental leadership work pushing conversion and expansion and, according to them, obedience for leadership, "are obedient to do evangelism," and Assefa's focused on church planting, respectively, reflecting findings regarding strategic leadership and findings that fundamental competitiveness, organizational culture, and effective control influence significantly on church growth, implying that strategic and missionally effective leadership maintains growth outcomes, even for internal religiosity (Ouma, 2018).

On the other hand, stagnation reports by participants like Cheru Ture and Mekdes Haile—"the growth of young people's number is limited... it is very small" and "there are no more new converts. Participants like Mikru Gizaw, Nesru Moshaga, and Netsanet pointed to youth migration and motivational decline as structural challenges that weaken local church numbers. It is indeed cold"—is a well-documented phenomenon in church studies: churches without adequate leadership strategies plateau or decline regardless of their historic presence or religiosity. Much literature highlights how leadership style influences church membership outcomes, with transformational, servant, ethical, and strategic leadership all showing positive relationships with growth indicators.

Taken together, these findings, along with current sources, point to a multilayered relationship between leadership quality and church growth. Quality leadership is not a unitary construct but embraces character, establishing credibility and trust; competence, realising effective discipleship and mission accomplishment; and strategy, guaranteeing integrated, mission-focused practices that translate vision into sustainable growth. Such an integrative understanding relates to academic views, which state that the nature of leadership and outcomes in organisations are influenced by moral authority, and not by power.

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These findings form a hierarchical thematic structure regarding the relationship between quality leadership and local church growth. At the highest level, leadership is understood as the principal determinant of both spiritual and numerical outcomes. Under this overarching theme, spiritual growth under leadership forms one major thematic domain, relating to leadership-facilitated discipleship, worship practices, and concerns about superficial or uneven formation. Another major thematic domain relates to numerical growth and leadership effectiveness, taking in evangelism-oriented leadership, church planting, multiplication, and experiences of stagnation or decline. The theme tree outlined below provides a comprehensive view of the hierarchical thematic framework.



**Figure 1: Summary Theme Tree**

## **Leadership Character and Local Church Leaders**

This research question targeted the leadership in general but zoomed in on the moral lives of the leaders, as the character of the local church leaders was considered the moral heart of the growth of the local church. The study investigated how the character, consistency, and perseverance of the leaders influence the witness and the growth of the church through the following themes.

### **Leader Character as the Moral Core of Church Growth**

Leadership quality in terms of character was viewed not as a supportive quality or a secondary aspect of leadership but as foundational. Almost all participants strongly and unanimously agreed that a leader's character directly influences the spiritual state of believers, the unity and relations of a church gathering, the persuasive argument of witnesses for Jesus Christ, and a church's ability to retain and gain members. Leadership skills often differ and may not necessarily be constant and general, and may even be conditional or dependent upon a given environment or situation, but leadership character was presented here as non-negotiable. Clearly, leadership without character in the collective imagination of participants is incomplete leadership.

This high degree of consensus arises from a profound biblical and theological vision of leadership, one that corresponds to recent literature in leadership studies that points to moral authority, integrity, and example as the main source of leadership in congregational settings (Banks & Ledbetter, 2020; Northouse, 2022). According to the participants, local church growth proceeds not from programs, personality, or resources, but more from the integrity and authenticity of local church leaders whose behaviour is daily observed and scrutinised by believers and unbelievers alike.

### **The Universally Affirmed Centrality of Leader Character**

The importance of a leader's character was articulated with great clarity and consistency by participants. Shikur Gibaga captured this conviction succinctly when he said, "The character of the church... is like the character of the leader." This opinion reflects a general feeling that there is a correlation between the local church's character and its leaders' character. Shikur Gibaga's view is that while the moral-spiritual ambience in the local church is being created, there is no autonomous development in this regard, but it all depends on the leader's moral-spiritual character. A much more striking formulation is that of Tadele Gebere, who emphasised that, "When there is no good leadership, there is no church." This opinion indicates that without moral leaders, there will be no church either. According to Tadele Gebere, leader character is more than just a factor that influences church character; leader character is foundational to church existence itself.

Yohannes Lobiso framed this principle in relational terms when he said, "More often than not, believers go as much as leaders go." His comment betrayed the essentially imitative nature of discipleship. Growth, in this understanding, is less a matter of instruction than of modelling. Believers grow spiritually and missionally only to the degree that their leaders themselves model growth. Taken together, these statements disclosed a common theological anthropology in which leadership is necessarily exemplary. Leaders are not simply instructors in doctrine but living texts whose lives interpret the gospel for others.

## **Positive Influence of Exemplary Leader Character on Church Growth**

Almost every participant repeatedly used the language of leaders with exemplary character as strong catalysts to spiritual and numerical growth. These leaders attract the unbelievers, inspire perseverance under persecution, model unity, love, and obedience in ways that shape the entire congregation. This is what Mikru Gizaw meant when he said that leaders will attract even outsiders when they live lives in integrity. Selam Habte similarly observed that it is not sermons that attract both believers and unbelievers but rather the visible consistency of the lives of local church leaders. Yohannes Lobiso affirms this perspective, noting that moral credibility opens doors for evangelistic engagement that would otherwise be closed.

Nesru Moshaga and Selam Habte both asserted that good character among local church leaders becomes particularly important in trying circumstances and when persecution is taking place. Nesru Moshaga stated that, "if leaders are models of courage, fidelity, and endurance, it gives believers the strength in time of trouble to stand instead of flee." "It gives believers a living example of costly discipleship." This was emphasised by Selam Habte. The evangelistic aspect of character was articulated with great eloquence by Assefa Aytehmar when he said, "Unbelievers read our life because our life is an open letter." This reflects a theology of the body as a living Bible in whose character the leaders must live, so that evangelism begins not with preaching but with living in integrity.

Dejene Deneke explained the role of leaders' character with a family example, asserting that "children's character is shaped by the character of their parents." The family example speaks of the closeness of church life. Here, leaders are like spiritual parents whose practices, mindsets, and values are unconsciously imprinted upon church members. Haile Agza Aytehmar added force to it by declaring: "Leaders are the mirror of what they have heard from God's word." The interpretation of this statement is that teaching without example has a deficiency. The word becomes believable only if it is mirrored through the life of the leader.

Bewketu Naji linked character traits of the leader directly to the outcomes of church growth when he said, "If the character of the leader is good, it affects believers and followers will follow him. Then growth will follow." Growth, according to Bewketu Naji, is the inevitable result of building trust. If the leader has character, followers will follow, and there will be more unity, which will enhance retention and conversion.

## **Character as the Foundation of Unity, Love, and Church Culture**

The participants repeatedly emphasised that the character of local church leaders is the single most important factor for the oneness and soundness of relationships within local churches. When the leaders exhibit genuinely humble, patient, loving, and obedient characters, the absence of cooperation and the presence of conflict will turn into a thing of the past. The leaders' example helps establish oneness instead of trying to enforce it through reprimands. The participants further reported cases of local churches with abundant love and mutual respect among the members simply because their leaders exhibit these values all the time.

Recent leadership scholarship corroborates participants' observations, indicating that trust and organisational cohesion are grounded primarily in moral authority rather than positional authority (Banks & Ledbetter, 2020). Bewketu Naji's observations aptly demonstrated the said point.

## Negative Impact of Poor Leader Character on Church Growth

While talking positively about the effects of exemplary local church leadership character qualities, participants talked negatively about the effects of bad character qualities. Bad character qualities were not taken as small issues but as harmful elements that destroy local church growth. Asnakech Argaw expressed a very bitter truth when she said, "If a leader doesn't possess good character, his or her congregation members don't feel comfortable coming to the church." She explained how bad character qualities affect the number of attendances at churches, emphasising that often members do not leave local churches because of religious conflicts but because of a lack of trust. Cheru Ture expounded this concept and explained that bad character qualities result in an increase of hatred among local church members, and such effects lead to decline.

Nesru Moshaga described the internal spiritual consequences of poor character, noting that it leads to discouragement and spiritual decline among believers. When leaders fail morally, members lose motivation and confidence, resulting in disengagement and passivity. Netsanet and Yohannes Lobiso both emphasised the loss of evangelistic credibility caused by poor character among local church leaders. According to them, moral inconsistency renders verbal witness ineffective. Unbelievers become sceptical, and evangelistic opportunities are lost.

Hiwot Mulugeta presented the strongest condemnation of the effects of poor leadership when she said, "local churches die spiritually...and a disobedient generation arises." Howot's views take a long-term approach in this matter, where the character of the leadership will not only have a short-term consequence on the generation of people but also the generations that come after them.

## Character as Both Internal Formation and External Witness

Through all the discourses of the participants, the character of local church leaders proactively influences believers and unbelievers. Internally, it moulds believers through obedience, humility, and perseverance. Externally, it acts as the chief witness for the local church's evangelistic mission. The reason why the participants strongly stressed that unbelievers judge Christian teachings through the lifestyle of Christian leaders is that, based on its dual role, the character of the leaders is closely related to the growth of the local church and acts as a discipling force and/or as a missional catalyst or hindrance.

## Integrated Summary

The emphasis on leader character was emphasised as the moral, spiritual, and missionally foundational element for any local church growth. Character, not some sort of "added value" to leadership. A Christlike quality of character, expressed in terms of love, humility, courage, unity, and obedience, leads to an experience of spiritual life, good relationships, and authentic evangelistic witness. A growth in local church life happens not by compulsion or superficial management, but by trust and imitation, as seen in these various researchers' statements:

1. According to Shikur Gibaga: "The character of the church... is like the character of the leader."
2. "Believers go as much as leaders go," Yohannes Lobiso.
3. "Unbelievers read our life because our life is a Bible," emphasised Assefa Aytihar.

The participants' narratives reflect current leadership literature, such as Northouse (2021), who emphasised that credibility, established through ethical consistency and relational transparency, is critical for effective local church leadership. On the other hand, participants lamented how degradation in character necessarily fosters decline. Asnakech Argaw warns, "If local church leaders do not have good character, the members do not like to come to church," while Hiwot Mulugeta observed that "the local churches die spiritually." Research into organisational behaviour bears these claims out: "ethical failures catalyse distrust, disconnect followers from mission or purpose, and threaten the legitimacy of the institution itself" (Ciulla, 2020).

1. These participants' observations align well with the biblical models for leadership outlined in the New Testament. 1 Peter 5:2–3 insists on pastorship and leadership regarding the care of God's people, indicating that one is "not under compulsion, but willingly; not for dishonest gain, but eagerly." This "prototype of Christlike leadership is the opposite of the 'ungodly leaders' attitude.' Character, therefore, is both the 'soil into which the life of discipleship is sown and the ground through which the message of the same gospel will either be received or rejected."
2. The character of the leader as a source of moral authority: The leaders' ethical character can result in increased legitimacy of the company as well as the retention of members.
3. Leader character as a missional lever: Christlike character makes a positive impact on Christian witness through conversion and improves the integrity of the community (Issac Ole Shaasha).

The observations made by almost every participant suggest that effective leadership development for local church leaders must necessarily combine spiritual integrity and such skills as planning and discipleship. However, it is the moral and spiritual quality of every local church leader that fundamentally impacts the viability of any local church's growth, retaining members, and level of spiritual formation on a direct basis; such is a decisive determinant because spiritual integrity is a determining factor affecting every aspect of a local church leader's ministry and mission.



**Figure 2: Summary Theme Tree**

## Discussion

The results of this research have shown that quality leadership is the key determinant of spiritual and numerical growth in local churches. Growth is not automatic; it is not simply dependent on external circumstances but is mediated through leadership vision, structure, and practice. Where there is strong leadership in establishing discipleship systems, worship commitment, and evangelistic obedience, there is significant spiritual and numerical growth. The research findings highlighted a unique imbalance between churches that are strong in spiritual formation without corresponding numerical growth and those which are strong in numerical growth without corresponding spiritual formation.

The results also indicate that church growth is not automatic or even necessarily linked to external factors, but when leaders implement a consistent discipleship structure, demonstrate commitment to corporate worship, and pursue evangelistic obedience, there is a corresponding level of spiritual and numerical growth in a church. Therefore, sustainable local church growth requires leadership that can integrate authentic spiritual nurture, modelling, and missional outreach.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Conclusion:** The findings of this study affirm that effective leadership within ecclesial contexts cannot be reduced to a single dimension such as competence or charisma. Rather, leadership effectiveness emerges from an integrated framework that combines character, competence, and spiritual depth. The study demonstrates that transformational and systems-oriented leadership perspectives consistently link leadership quality with measurable outcomes such as congregational growth, cohesion, and missional impact.

In particular, the results highlight that leadership character is not merely a moral add-on but a foundational element that shapes trust, credibility, and long-term sustainability within the church. At the same time, competence remains indispensable for strategic direction, administration, and the ability to navigate complex ministry environments.

Therefore, the growth and health of the local church are best understood as the product of holistically formed leaders who embody both integrity and capability. Any imbalance between these dimensions risks undermining both internal unity and external witness.

**Recommendations:** The following recommendations are proposed to enhance leadership effectiveness and foster sustainable local church growth within the SBGKHC district by integrating both character and competence in leadership structures and development.

### **Integrated Leadership Criteria for Policy Formulation**

This study strongly recommends that local church policymakers adopt an integrated leadership framework when selecting or appointing leaders, intentionally rejecting the false dichotomy between character and competence by recognizing them as mutually reinforcing dimensions of leadership; policies should therefore be designed to assess moral and spiritual integrity (character) as well as skills, knowledge, and leadership effectiveness (competence), ensuring that leadership selection processes produce leaders who are not only capable of managing local church affairs but are also spiritually grounded and ethically reliable, since without this dual emphasis local church leadership structures risk becoming either spiritually shallow or operationally ineffective, and leadership development pipelines must align with this integrated vision to ensure continuity between policy and practice.

### **Priority of Character in Leadership Selection**

While both character and competence are essential, the findings underscore that character must take precedence in leadership selection, as it functions as the foundation upon which all other leadership capacities are built; the study affirms that congregational trust is primarily rooted in perceived integrity, unity and cooperation are sustained by moral credibility, and the church's public witness is shaped by the character of its leaders, and therefore warns that neglecting character exposes local churches to risks such as internal conflict, loss of credibility, and spiritual decline, recommending that leadership selection processes incorporate intentional mechanisms such as spiritual maturity assessments, peer and congregational testimonies, and long-term observation of lifestyle and conduct.

## Holistic Formation of Leaders

The study further recommends a shift toward holistic leadership formation at all levels of the local church, emphasizing that leadership development should not focus exclusively on skills acquisition or organizational planning but must equally prioritize character formation and spiritual development, thereby nurturing leaders who demonstrate personal discipline and spiritual maturity, model Christ-like behavior within the community, and inspire trust and respect both inside and outside the church; such leaders contribute significantly to the internal health of local churches by fostering disciplined and committed communities of Christ's disciples, with their reputation and integrity serving as a powerful form of witness and a catalyst for missional engagement, influencing others through the authenticity of their lives, and for this to be realized, local churches should intentionally invest in mentorship and discipleship programs, continuous spiritual formation practices, and leadership training that integrates theology, ethics, and practical ministry skills.

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