

Research Article

Healing the Body of Christ: A Theological Reflection on the Church's Schism, Leadership, and Peacebuilding Role in Ethnically Polarized South Sudan

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Abstract

The Church in South Sudan is at a crossroads where its actions could lead to further division and conflict or toward peace, healing, and reconciliation. The ongoing conflict, uncertainties, and schisms within the church have caused continued division along ethnic lines, especially at local levels such as in churches and communities. This has further eroded trust in church leaders, challenging their trustworthiness, as some leaders are complicit in conflicts and divisions that affect the people. This could be a result of deviations from ethical teachings, a lack of adherence to theological foundations, and the weakening practice of servant leadership that eroded social ethics, hindering efforts of social transformation and promotion of the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17. The failure in exercising humility, servanthood, and Christ-centered leadership of powerlessness among the Christian leaders is to blame. As a result, the church struggles to influence society as it should. This paper analyzes the role of the church in perpetuating either division or conflict in society, with a focus on South Sudan. It offers a biblical and theological vision for unity, peacebuilding, and social transformation, providing the basis for the church's expected role. Drawing from the Scriptures, theological insights, and transformational development approaches such as those of Bryant Myers' *Walking with the Poor*, the paper calls for a church's review of its positions and ways including through repentance and embrace the missional approaches, and servant leadership through renewed commitment to Christ's great commission to contribute effectively to peacebuilding, healing, and holistic social transformation of the society.

Keywords

Church Schism, Christianity, Peacebuilding, Leadership, Healing and Reconciliation, Ethnicity, Social Transformation, South Sudan

1. Introduction

The Church in South Sudan, like any other church in the world, once a beacon of hope and center of moral authority during the country's long struggle for independence, has found itself entangled in a web of internal divisions, conflict, and leadership crises, which by extension affects the con-

gregations and society at large. This is not a new phenomenon as this troubling pattern emerged in the early 2000s, driving division, church splits, conflict among the church leaders, driven by personal ambition, ethnic loyalties, and political influence, that have eventually fractured denominations, mo-

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bilized communities into conflict, and even involved state security organs to suppress presumed rivals. These continued untamed schisms have not only weakened the church and lowered its spiritual integrity but have also deepened community divisions, shattered leaders' relationships, and significantly contributed to the already fragile and ethnically polarized situation of the country. Additionally, the church leaders have lost both respect and high regard as spiritual leaders who were once respected and listened to in the community. This has practically diminished their role in commanding the trust and loyalty of their congregations, hence limiting the efforts of peacebuilding, reconciliation activities, and developmental programs once spearheaded by the Church.

The church is seen as an institution endowed with spiritual tools to bring lasting solutions to persisting community-level conflicts and perhaps political conflict. However, with the current situation, coupled with the growing socio-political landscape where the church is seen as a growing player, including through possible meddling in political issues, several questions arise. The question of integrity, neutrality, and command of trust by the church is critical. The second part is whether the church at this level can play a vital role in championing justice, peace, and reconciliation in South Sudan, given the critical issues it faces. As South Sudan continues to navigate the tumultuous waters of peacebuilding and development, this paper offers a critical evaluation to the church's missional work by providing answers to these questions and offering a renewed call to church leaders and Christian community to re-establish the church's credibility, spirituality authority and through a genuine reformation, reposition itself as the center of hopes, peace, justice and moral guidance.

1.1. Research Background

The paper arises from a deep concern that has been witnessed over the years as the role of the Church continues to dissipate, with more activities being seen as perpetuating conflict and deepening the wounds of division, rather than healing the South Sudanese society. The Church, as the body of Christ, is called to be a model of unity, peace, and justice, not a mirror of the political and ethnic conflicts that plague the nation. [1, 10, 11] To provide clarity, the paper seeks to offer a theological reflection on the nature of church leadership and its missional role grounded in Scripture and the teachings of Christ, to challenge the current trajectory and call for a return to godly, servant leadership. It draws largely from the biblical texts, particularly the teachings of Jesus in the Beatitudes, the prophetic critique of corrupt shepherds in Ezekiel, and Jesus' vision of unity in the body of Christ. It will also explore how a reformed and spiritually renewed Church can become a powerful agent of peacebuilding, social justice, and community transformation, hence healing the body of Christ.

In so doing, the paper engages with developmental theology, particularly the insights of Bryant Myers in *Walking with*

the Poor, to propose practical pathways for the Church to contribute to national healing, social transformation, and development. Further, the paper provides insights on servant leadership and character shaping, by engaging with like-minded authors such as Dallas Willard, Greenleaf, Branson and Martinez, and Wilmer, among others. These provide a foundational and logical start for the highly needed renewal, challenging the church leaders to reflect on the principles of Christ's leadership and mission of healing the body of Christ through reconciliation and peacebuilding.

1.2. Methodology

The paper employs a biblical analysis of leadership and a review of various literature to provide an analysis of the unfolding realities and twenty-first-century church leadership in an ethnically polarized African country. It uses the biblical and theoretical frameworks to develop a conceptual framework that defines the transformational Christian leadership required for the healing of the church and restoring the broken world. The use of various literature and biblical exegesis allows for an analysis that is informed by contemporary issues and grounded in the biblical foundation of Christian mission and Ministry.

2. Theoretical and Theological Framework on Leadership

In their iconic book "Churches, Cultures and Leadership," Branson and Martinez asserted that, "If there is no one ideal strategy or model for all churches, then each particular church, usually in local networks and other associations, must gain competencies and capacities that are specific to its own time and place." [2] This includes, but is not limited to, the church's engagement with social and cultural networks; it extends to social justice and cultivation of hopes, including in economics and political conversations, as part of its mandates to ensure healing and harmony in society. The role played by the church in society must reflect the ideals of Christian calling and the mission of Christ on earth, and therefore be exhibited through the leadership of Christian churches, whose actions and leadership should redirect society in a better and holier path. As we reflect on these, it is essential to understand that both the biblical vision of leadership and secular theories do not promote divisive, political, or selfish desires, but rather service delivery or servanthood as the main purpose of a leader. [3] Service delivery is grounded in the theories and biblical framework that undergird social transformation and sustainable development, with humanity at the heart. Contributing to these processes, the Christian leaders and church not only work as a united force to foster social change but also support and contribute effectively to the goal of God's mission, shalom. The conceptual framework here presents these realities and how the transformational Christian leadership is achieved through a series of building blocks and the embrace of God's mission of restoration and shalom, fostering the unity of

brethren.



Figure 1. Transformational Leadership Conceptual Framework by Daniel Ajak, August 2025.

2.1. The Biblical Vision of Leadership

The Biblical model of leadership has its richness in God's glory and mission on earth, which has become the driving force of Christian mission in the world. At the heart of biblical leadership and Christian service is servanthood and powerlessness, not self-promotion, worldly power, or exerting any control or will over others. Jesus, the ultimate model, redefined greatness by washing His disciples' feet (John 13: 1-17), teaching that "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20: 26). The genesis of the biblical vision for leadership started at the Garden of Eden when God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.... Then God blessed them...have dominion..." (Genesis 1: 26, 27 & 28). The word dominion, as used in this verse, has a great significance in leadership as it equates to rulership, overseeing, caretaker-ship, and stewardship. This is not the same as having dominance, which equates to the selfish exertion of will and tyrannical control over the people. The servant leadership as envisioned in the bible is the soul of the church as established by Christ, and this stands in contrast to the power struggles that have plagued the church and its leadership, particularly in South Sudan. This is why Paul redirected the church to embrace unity in Spirit, envisioning the Church as a unified body, where every member is valued and interdependent, building the body of Christ and leading the world to salvation (1 Corinthians 12: 12-27; Ephesians 4: 11-13). When leaders try to exert control without adhering to such

principles, this results in dividing the Church and making the church deviate from the mission and Christian vocation.

2.2. The Theoretical Framework for Servant Leadership

Leadership is defined as the ability of an individual or group to lead and influence a group, society, organization, or team toward a particular vision or goal. There has continued to be an argument between a leader and a boss, with the former being referred to as one who influences and leads by example with charismatic drive, whereas the latter is referred to as arrogant, threatening, and often coercing people to do things rather than leading them through. As this contrast is clear, servanthood takes shape in what a leader must do in leading, serving, and influencing people towards the desired goal, a reason why world leaders and government bureaucrats are often called public and civil servants, respectively. Bob Clinton, in his book *The Making of a Leader*, further developed this definition into a well-structured and digestible coinage that reflects not only Christian values but servanthood in the creator's intended vision for the world. "A leader, as defined from a study of biblical leadership, and for whom we are interested in tracing leadership development, is a person (1) with God-given capacity and (2) with God-given responsibility to influence (3) a specific group of God's people (4) toward God's purposes for the group." [4] This is true not only in the sense of Christian leadership but equally in secular leadership, where politicians are expected to lead through a purpose-driven and well-thought-out vision with practical and achievable milestones. Leadership is not only planted by God, but it is also nurtured through the process towards the Goal and for God's true purpose as seen in the lives of King David, King Solomon, and various leaders who have always led as God-fearing leaders guided by the purpose that is godly and rewarding rather than oppression to the people they lead. Robert Greenleaf, in his long-time service and writing, having seen much of leadership styles expressed that, he "wishes that leaders will bend their efforts to serve with skill, understanding, and spirit, and that followers will be responsive only to able servants who would lead them." [5] Servant leadership is not just a service; it goes beyond service; it is more about the character, the spirit that drives, and the heart to serve and lead as an example to others.

2.3. The Prophetic Critique of Corrupt Shepherds and Kings

The biblical (Old Testament) prophets often had their ways, including rebuking leaders and offering guidance for wise leadership, and at times going head-on with those who exploited their positions for selfish gains. As seen in the life and ministry of Samuel, he was so vocal and clear, including advising King Saul and later used by God to appoint David as the new King when Saul failed in leadership (1 Samuel 12, 13

& 16). Through the prophet Ezekiel (34), God condemns the shepherds of Israel who fed themselves instead of the flock, ruled harshly, and scattered the sheep. This prophetic rebuke was intended not only for the church leaders (priests) but equally to the rulers and community leaders whom God has placed to rule his people. The passage resonates deeply with the current affairs of South Sudan, where both church and community leaders can hardly be distinguished in fueling conflict and causing disunity among the people (the believers' community). Suppose leaders have prioritized personal power, selfish gains, and exerting control over pastoral care and visionary leadership, leading to division and spiritual disillusionment. In that case, consequences always come into play, including chaos, intense conflict, and God's intervention, as seen over the ages. The Dream speech that would change the nation years later was delivered by Martin Luther King Jr in America in 1963, following a century of what was believed to have been a failure of leadership to live by the Emancipation Proclamation of the American dream - freedom. Martin Luther King Jr stood firm not only to remind leaders and governance structures about the importance of that particular freedom that is inclusive, but to strongly prophesy about it becoming true at a later date, despite any suppression one may believe to do. His speeches projected dissatisfaction and criticized the leadership and governance over the social justice and lack of framework to ensure freedom for all, warning that it was evil and would change by all means, years later. [6] This is what is desired of the God-fearing leaders to stand up for the truth and point out critical areas where improvement is needed to address social injustice and bring needed change. This is why God warns (Jeremiah 23) against prophets and priests who "strengthen the hands of evildoers" and fail to speak the truth in a society. When leaders become agents of conflict, they not only harm the Church—they oppose God's purposes and therefore create more harm to the society at large, forfeiting their spiritual purpose of being revered in the society as it is happening in South Sudan today where ethics and Christian living once highly regarded is fading slowly as church leaders could not command the same respect and trust of the society.

2.4. The Beatitudes and the Ethical Values of the Christian Kingdom

The book of Matthew in the New Testament outlined a sermon by Jesus Christ on the Mount, where key ethical values and fruits of the Kingdom were discussed. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) not only provided the basis for Christian values but also called for the Christian leaders and believers to live up to the values to receive the blessings of the kingdom. Jesus mentioned that the meek will inherit the earth, those who seek righteousness shall be filled, and the merciful shall be shown mercy, as well as peacemakers becoming children of God (Matthew 5: 5-9). He further emphasized that Christians are the salt and light of the world,

implying the role a believer and a Christian leader must play in society as exemplars in doing good and maintaining the teachings and leadership of Christ. Jesus was clear on these because he knew what was to come: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves." Matthew 7: 15). This is a clear warning that not everyone who presents themselves as a Christian leader is truly one following the path of Christ to shepherd the flock, bearing the light of Christ and salt in society. Jesus wanted to clear the path for true Christian leaders, providing hints to society to distinguish between ravenous wolves and true Christians who exhibit the true values of the Kingdom. Church leaders are to be ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5: 18-20), not instigators of division.

Moreover, Jesus calls His followers to hunger for righteousness, show mercy, and pursue purity of heart. These are not abstract ideals; they are the moral compass for leadership. When church leaders abandon these principles, they cease to reflect Christ and instead mirror the brokenness of the world, hence losing the trust of people and the blessings of Christ for a fruitful and spiritually growing church community. A clear decline could be witnessed today in South Sudan, where the main church denominations are experiencing continuous divisions, church splits, conflict in churches, and unceasing social-setting battles that are often putting communities into loggerheads or causing total division altogether. These are not the social values of the Kingdom taught by Christ, but condemned behaviors and actions that are not needed. [2, 13, 14, 24, 25]

2.5. Unity as a Theological Imperative

Theologically and in practice, no Christian leader or pastor would boast of being a good leader without the ability to maintain the unity of brethren, building on the foundation laid by Christ himself to reconcile and unite the people of God as one people in the same spirit. It would be futile to think of being a good leader while promoting division and disunity among the Christians and, by extension, the society. Psalm 133: 1 declares, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" From the beginning, unity has remained not only a social good for the community but a theological foundation of the Christian community. Jesus was clearer in prayer on the unity of Christian leaders and the community of believers as recorded by John 17: 20-23;

"My prayer is not for *them alone*. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that *all of them* may be *one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be *one as we are one*. I in them and you in me - so that they may be brought to *complete unity*. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

This is the foundation of true unity in the church and

community, a complete unity desired by Christ from the community of believers, both leaders witnessing and the believers who hear the word. It is the only way that we must align to Christ's desired goal, the union of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. For if they truly live in us and we (believers) in Christ, then we are able to fulfil his love and unity of minds and spirit, abounding together as a community of God's Kingdom. There would be no place for hatred, jealousy, and betrayals, fights, and many other unethical values that are short of the glory of God. Disunity among church leaders undermines the credibility of the gospel and weakens the Church's witness in society.

In a nation like South Sudan, where ethnic divisions run deep, any Church disunity is made worse as it trickle down the spine of cultural and social divides, triggering hidden sociopolitical bombs to destabilized and destroy the social fabrics in the community, and equally fulfilling what Jesus said that, "At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold," (Matthew 24: 10-12), hence the growth of disunity and consequential suffering that follows. The church must rise beyond this challenge and the consequential realities of the devil's scheme in the form of disunity, hatred, and social divide, and must embrace the true calling of the servant leaders, fostering peace as the unifying factor above tribalism and ethnic divides to transform the communities spiritually. This requires leaders who are spiritually mature, biblically grounded, and committed to the ministry of reconciliation. [5]

2.6. God's Restorative Mission as *Shalom*

The overarching narrative of Scripture—from Genesis to Revelation—is centered on God's mission to restore creation and bring about ultimate *shalom*—a state of holistic peace, justice, and flourishing where there is no more pain, no diseases or death, but serenity. This divine mission is not only spiritual but deeply social, economic, cultural, and political in nature and calls upon the leaders to participate in God's redemptive work in the world. From the beginning, God's intent was for humanity to live in harmony with Him, with one another, and with creation (Genesis 1-2). The fall disrupted this peace, but the biblical story unfolds as a journey of restoration, culminating in the prophetic visions of peace and justice (Isaiah 11) and the final renewal of all things, the very goal we work for in this world (Revelation 21). This entails that Christian leadership is a *missional vocation*—a calling to embody and advance God's restorative purposes in the ever-changing and broken world. Christian Leaders are not merely meant to be pastors in the church or ministry leaders influencing their followers; they are agents of reconciliation, healing, and hope. Grace J Kim and Graham Hill, in their book *Healing Our Broken Humanity*, challenged the church to the nine practices of transformation to bring about healing and

reimagine the new role of the church in society as it contributes to the missional vocation of Christ in the world. This vision challenges leaders to move beyond institutional maintenance and altar services toward transformative engagement with the brokenness of society, cultivating repentance, healing, and renewal. In the context of South Sudan, where conflict, division, and trauma have deeply wounded communities, Christian leaders are uniquely positioned to model and facilitate restoration and healing. Leaders must embrace the values that contribute to social transformation. [2, 7, 10, 11, 22, 23]

3. The Church's Mission as Peacebuilding

"In a world full of division and conflict, the church needs to embrace the ministry of reconciliation and peace-making. God calls us to be a peaceable people who display unity in diversity under Christ." [7] The Church's mission on earth is both guided and led by Christ through the Holy Spirit, and it is a reconciliatory, restoration and peace-making mission. This goes beyond modern times, but traces back to the start of time, and the early church through the mighty work of the Holy Spirit. This has both historical roots and spiritual authority to achieve greater good for society. South Sudan is a great example of resolving conflicts through the involvement of the church.

3.1. Historical Role of the Church in African Conflicts

Across the African continent, the Church has often played a great role in conflict resolutions, reconciliation, and peacebuilding—a role never played in isolation but equally in an environment where it could either be a catalyst for peace or a contributor to conflict. In South Africa, the church is mentioned as having participated in the conflict, both siding with the oppressive apartheid regime through the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and equally opposing the very injustices through other denominations, such as through the leadership of Archbishop Tutu, among others. This, in Tutu's understanding, was because people like to interpret the bible in their understanding to justify their actions and views. [8] This places the church at the centre of both good and bad choices, where Christian leaders would not be trusted by society due to divergent views and a lack of ethical standing in biblically related matters. In Rwanda, for example, some church leaders were reportedly complicit in the 1994 genocide, while others risked their lives to protect the innocent. This is the reason Jooste noted in his proposal to separate the church from the state to protect the church and forge a clear path to the divine calling through the Holy Spirit. [9]

In Liberia and Kenya, churches have served as platforms for reconciliation and national healing, such as the National

Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) made great efforts at both the local and national levels in coordination with other faith-based organizations and governments, and parties to resolve the conflict caused by post-election violence in 2007/2008. [10] In South Sudan, the Church has historically been a unifying force during the liberation struggle. Notably, the facilitation of the reunification of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and Community-led peace accords, such as the Wunlit and Liliir, among others, that were facilitated by the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) with support from partners, including in close collaboration with the NCCCK. The church was also involved in the processes that led to the peace agreement and creation of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area in 2012 and subsequent grassroots peacebuilding in South Sudan. These examples show that the Church's influence can be either redemptive or destructive, depending on the integrity and vision of its leadership. However, prior to the independence of South Sudan, the church already had internal divisions, though historical precedent of the 1980s existed; this was a fresh start in the early 2000s, leading to the independence of South Sudan. Such divisions continued to challenge the church's unity and weakened its moral authority. The challenge now is to reclaim that legacy and reposition the Church as a credible agent of peace, reconciliation, and community development with moral and spiritual authority. How can that be achieved in an environment where the church mobilizes the communities to fight against each other over control, and where there is no peace among the church leaders, even when the government gets involved to broker their peace and reconciliation? These are critical questions with no quick-fix solutions unless the leaders turn to biblical reasoning and are transformed through the guidance of the Holy Spirit to embrace the ethical church's moral calling. [10-14, 22, 25]

3.2. The Church's Moral and Spiritual Authority

The Church holds a unique position in society, starting with directing the spiritual path to healing, reconciliation, and moral ethics that are the pillars of societal existence in the world. Jesus, in Matthew 5: 13-16, was very clear on this moral calling and the spiritual authority and trust that the church holds in a society. "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." Jesus was pointing out the moral duty and values the church would carry in the society as a transforming force that comes into the lives of the people to lighten their hopes, heal their wounds, and restore sanity where trust and respect are lost. It is the moral duty of the Christian leaders, therefore, to lead this process and direct the church into doing the "good deeds and [glorifying the] Father in heaven." In a society like South Sudan, which is coming out of war, divided by ethnic and

political differences, the church must become a crucial bridge with a genuine and undivided mission of restoring peace through the gospel. [15]

The church of Jesus Christ can speak life and hope into this situation. It can proclaim and embody the new creation in Christ and show a different ethic and way of life in the world. God enables us, as God's one, new, and transformed people, to recover our humanity and help change the world. [7] This is the mission of the church, where its moral foundation and spiritual authority are derived. Failure to embrace and live by this calling is the ultimate disorientation of the Gospel mission. Bosch stated clearly that the church's mission must always reflect God's love and salvation, proclaiming the incarnate Christ, for the Church exists because there is a Mission, not vice versa. To participate in a mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love....We cannot without ado claim that what we do is identical to the *missio Dei*; our missionary activities are only authentic insofar as they reflect participation in the mission of God....The primary purpose of the *missiones ecclesiae* can therefore not simply be the planting of churches or the saving of souls; rather, it has to be service to the *missio Dei*, representing God in and over against the world, pointing to God, holding up the God-child before the eyes of the world in a ceaseless celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany. [16]

In representing God's love and care for the world, the church becomes a strong instrument of peace, healing and reconciliation with the mission to announce, "the good news; transform cultures; providing justice for the poor; promoting encounter, dialogue, and witness among the religions of the world; building peace in a world of violence; and caring for the environment." [17] This gives it immense potential to mediate conflicts, promote dialogue, and foster reconciliation. However, this potential can only be realized if church leaders embody the values they preach—humility, justice, forgiveness, and love among themselves and with others, united for a common purpose and calling. The Church must undergo a process of internal healing, reformation, and repositioning. This includes acknowledging past failures, repenting of divisive actions, and committing to a new path of unity and service. Only then can the church speak prophetically to the nation and lead by example the transformation and peace-building, through evangelistic missions, undivided.

3.3. Evangelism as a Tool for Unity and Healing

Evangelism, when rooted in the gospel of love, care, and peace, can be a powerful tool for healing broken souls and relationships. The message of Christ is inherently reconciling—it calls people to be reconciled with God and with one another (2 Corinthians 5: 18-19) to inherit the promised Kingdom. Churches must shift from preaching tribal loyalty or denominational superiority to proclaiming the inclusive love of Christ that breaks down every dividing wall (Ephesians 2: 14) and work through the unity in diversity for a

common goal and purpose, removing social barriers and leading the transformation of society through the Gospel. Through evangelistic campaigns, interdenominational fellowships, and community outreach, the Church can model a new kind of unity—one that is not based on ethnicity or politics, but on shared faith and mission. Myers devoted a full chapter in his book on Christian witness, providing a clear explanation of evangelism and its connection to transformational development as using the same approach to change people and relationships, for the Christian witness desires the “poor and non-poor, and ourselves” can recover “our true identity as children of God and the restoration of our true vocation as productive stewards in God’s creation.” This is the transforming mission and evangelistic role the church must embrace. [18]

3.4. Community-Based Peacebuilding and Development

Drawing from Bryant Myers’ *Walking with the Poor*, the Church can also engage in transformational development that addresses the root causes of conflict—poverty, marginalization, and broken relationships. This speaks to restorative justice and transforming society through holistic development, which translates to the mission of Christ in restoring relations with God, with self, with others, and with creation. It would not make sense for anyone to boast of being so religious or a good Christian without following Christ and his mission on earth as restorative and rebuilding. “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves,...Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1: 27). By understanding this vocation, the church can become a centre of community transformation both through spiritual witnessing and community-based peacebuilding and development by ensuring the programs such as trauma healing, education and vocational skills building, health and partnerships are incorporated as integral part of the mission alongside promoting community cohesion, dialogues, reconciliation and development. [15] By integrating spiritual renewal with social transformation, the Church can help rebuild the moral and shattered social fabric of South Sudan, hence mending all the broken relationships, healing broken souls, and reestablishing the moral and ethical foundation of the nation-building. [18]

4. Call to Action: Reclaiming the Church’s Prophetic and Community Transformation Mandate

4.1. A Call to Repentance and Renewal

The first step of every Christian is to repent of all sinful

deeds and submit to God for renewal, and through his grace, one will find salvation and follow their calling by faith. Paul made it clear that “do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.” (Romans 6: 12-13) This is serving us well if truly the Christian embraces it and follows the leadership of the Holy Spirit through the renewal of our lives in Christ. To the leaders, this is even more emphasized as leading the people requires utmost humility, honesty, transparency and accountability, all that starts with not allowing sinful desires to use your mortal body to achieve its goals in either pushing divisive agendas, creating chaos and conflict or doing anything that God doesn’t desire in the name of being a powerful leader. This is why Paul in Romans 12: 1-2 reminded us, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” This passage reminds us that we cannot approve or understand God’s perfect will unless we have renewed our minds and repented from the sinful desires of this world. It is important that the church leader, as any other leader to acknowledge the shortcomings and failures one has encountered through the Ministry to learn from, repent, and rework their steps rather than to continue being high of themselves and showing no remorse for whatever wrong that happens around them. This is the right time in South Sudan for the Church leaders to acknowledge how they have contributed to division, conflict, and tribalization of the church, which has contributed significantly to the erosion of trust among the Christian communities and Christian leaders alike. Ruth Barton posits that the challenges of spiritual leadership, daily performance, and management of the church are always contradictory, and often, if overlooked, lead the leader to forget their souls in trying to achieve greatness and maximization of the church. She asserts that “the soulful leader pays attention to such inner realities and the questions that they raise rather than ignoring them” in order to strengthen the soul of their leadership and lead from within their inner soul and faith rather than leading primarily from their head or “performance-oriented drivenness.” [19] The renewal and inner search are crucial for church leadership, especially for the spiritual leaders in South Sudan, most of whom are caught in the crossroads between Christian witness and ethnic divisions. Spiritual maturity and obedience to Christ require repentance and renewal as part of regaining the soul of Christ’s leadership; it should not be seen as weakness. Leaders must seek personal transformation through prayer, accountability, and discipleship, allowing the Holy Spirit to reshape their character and vision. And of course, one may not do this without facing their shadow, the hidden part of the person that shapes some characters in a leader. Scazzero, in his book *“The Emotionally*

Healthy Leader,” defines this as “the accumulation of untamed emotions, less-than-pure motives and thoughts that, while largely unconscious, strongly influence and shape your behaviors. It is the damaged but mostly hidden version of who you are.” This is what every leader must tame and face in the process of renewal to lead healthily. There is much more work needed on the inner life of the leader in the renewal process to lead healthily in the outer life and unite the church, healing the body of Christ. [20]

4.2. Embracing the Unity and Love in Christ

The true unity of brethren and cultivation of the love of Christ to pursue his will, the perfect will of the Lord, does not just come without an effort and spiritual discernment. Spiritual discernment is not only the path of a leader’s renewal but the ultimate embrace of leadership by the Holy Spirit to guide our path, helping us discern what God is doing around us and helping us participate in his mission. Ruth Barton, in her book “Pursuing God’s Will Together,” discussed the spiritual discernment, pointing out the critical mistakes of leadership and highlighting key building blocks that we need, including embracing Christ as the head of the church, which is the ultimate pillar that bring us together as one body of Christ, cultivate the impulse to discern Christ’s fashion, deep belief in goodness of God, understanding our ultimate calling as Christians is love and committing to doing God’s will. Without the will of God and the love of Christ, it will be hard to cultivate and embrace the spirit of unity and love, hence rendering us spiritually blind through societal and religious views, as Pharisees (Matthew 23). [21]

Seamands reminds us that, “The ministry we have entered is the ministry of Jesus Christ, the son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world” and it is practically the key purpose of Christianity, “without it, Christian Ministry becomes another helping profession and Christian service rather than Christ mission [26] that David emphasized in the book of Psalm 133: 1, proclaiming that, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” This unity is not uniformity, but a Spirit-led harmony that transcends ethnic, denominational, and political boundaries. Jesus prayed for this unity in John 17: 21, linking it directly to the credibility of the Church’s witness: “that the world may believe that you have sent me.” This unity is born out of love and fellowship with God the Father through Christ, the head of the church, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The love of Christ would not be complete without the ultimate goal of the mission and restoration - shalom. Since the beginning, God has been on a restorative mission, and so must Christians, partaking in this great commission, follow the same steps. If there is much that needs to be done, it is to embrace the ultimate shalom, the peace of God that transcends all knowledge, ethnicities, cultures, thoughts, and might to achieve the love, care, and established unions where hate and jealousy once lived. This is achievable through the renewal of minds, change of hearts, and following the leadership of the

Holy Spirit as good shepherds and servant leaders appointed to serve humanity with pure love, and care for others, proclaiming the unchanging gospel of Christ to all, irrespective of their backgrounds. Church leaders must actively pursue reconciliation with one another, model interdenominational cooperation, and preach messages that heal rather than divide. The Church must become a sanctuary of peace in a land torn by conflict. [2, 7, 11, 20-23, 26]

4.3. Living the Gospel of Truth, Justice, and Peace as Christians

Myers declared that “Separating gospel-as-word, gospel-as-deed, and gospel-as-sign has serious consequences. ...The way we live and act declares to others what we mean when we say we are Christians.” And this is true for any Christian who would love to live by the Gospel of Christ, as he stated in the beatitudes - Matthew 5: 13-16, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? ...You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” One cannot be a good salt or a light unless they are just, serve all people irrespective of distinctions or differences, and treat everyone equally before the Creator, preaching the gospel of shalom, and leading by example. Otherwise, how can they lead well if they deviate from the truth, fail to peacefully coexist, lose sight of justice and fairness, or refuse to confront injustice and live as examples to their followers and those they lead? Paul instructed Timothy to understand and ensure that he conducts himself with reverence and humility, serving well as a good teacher (1 Timothy 4). Whether current Christian leaders, especially in South Sudan, follow these teachings and embody the life expected of Christ-like servants and leaders is a critical concern to be addressed another day. However, the point here is that Christian leaders, especially in South Sudan, should reevaluate their actions and services, “what it means ...to be ministers of God in a land scarred by war, hatred, violence and poverty.” [15] Divisive politics, ethnic segregation, tribalization of churches, stirring conflict among communities, and any other contributions that overshadow Christian service are not what Jesus asked his disciples to do. Instead, they should carry out the Great Commission: transform lives through the gospel, share love and care, and bring shalom to the doorsteps of all communities, ethnicities, languages, tribes, and races. The recent surge in church issues, divisive politics, and community-led church conflicts must be called to a spiritual order. Despite all efforts, the church can never succeed in what it preaches or does while harbouring contempt and internal divisions. Church leaders in South Sudan must reconcile within their ranks and their congregations, and then help the larger society contribute meaningfully and positively to the government’s and other international bodies’ peace initiatives. Church leaders must lead by example—resolving disputes peacefully, promoting dialogue, and discipling their congregations in the way of Christ. The gospel

must not only be preached from the pulpit but lived out in everyday relationships to change society. [1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 15, 17-19, 21, 23]

4.4. Mobilizing for Social Transformation

The Church is not only a spiritual institution but also a social force that preaches the gospel and discerns God's perfect will, uses the gospel to transform communities and change lives. Villacorta posits that, in her service, "Mother Teresa reflected a life of powerlessness because she had no aspirations to be anything but a faithful servant. Success was not her concern...in serving and caring for the weak and marginalized, she was serving Jesus." This is the selfless life of a Christian devoted to transforming the lives of others, and through the church, this transformation is even more profound as it is carried out through communities. [1] Drawing from Bryant Myers' *Walking with the Poor*, churches can become catalysts for community transformation in many aspects, through supporting local and community driven development initiatives, trauma healing, reconciliations, empowering youth in churches and communities through education, entrepreneurship, women empowerment as well as partnering with community based organizations, civil societies and local governments to address critical areas and advance peacebuilding initiatives while maintaining the neutrality at all cost. [18] This is not a departure from the gospel—it is its full expression and the meaning of love of Christ and care for his flocks. As noted by Woodbridge and Joynt, the approach of social and holistic transformation of the communities is centred in the Gospel of Christ and his teachings, as reflected by the ELIJAH model, and this requires the Christian leaders not only to embrace but to live by and align with in every aspect of their lives and church programs. [23] The transformative power of the Gospel of Christ should be the driving force of social mobilization and transformation, for it is in powerlessness that we emerge stronger. "In weakness, foolishness, and vulnerability, we discover a world-transforming [power of Christ]. In humility and self-giving, we open space for God to reveal his power ...of grace and love." It is not only the power of peace and integrity but of truth that "honors and heals, forgives, and unites." [7] It is in the best interest of the church to embrace this transformative power, rise, and reclaim its position as the social force that transforms using the Gospel to change lives and make meaningful impacts among the communities and ethnicities. It is the time to mobilize, not as individuals, or denominations, but as a Christ-planted church that is participating and witnessing for Christ, making disciples of all nations and teaching the people to obey Christ and follow his commandments to change their lives (Matthew 28: 20). We must embrace ethnicity, as a blessing for the church that brings multiculturalism in the mission of Christ, a great opportunity for the social transformation, reconciliation, and peacebuilding.

5. Conclusion

The Church in South Sudan, like any other church in the world, stands at a critical crossroads. Once a symbol of hope and unity, it now risks becoming a reflection of the very divisions it was called to heal. The schisms, power struggles, and politicization of church leadership have not only weakened the Church's witness but have also deepened the wounds of an already fractured society. The church, though, could not be so distinct during conflicts, has always been regarded as a peaceful and spiritual place where peace and calm reign. Across Africa, the church is seen to have contributed positively to achieving peace and harmony among the communities, but that does not rule out circumstances such as the Apartheid or Rwanda situations, and presently, South Sudan, where the church faces divisions and internal conflict. This called for an overhaul of the whole spectrum, to chart a right course with a biblical framework that undergirds Christian leadership and Christ's mission, where the church participates. The church does not have a mission, but it participates in God's mission, guided by the principles therein, preaching and witnessing across the nations to change lives and bring humanity close to God. Understanding this is important for Christian leadership and the church's missional foundation as prayed for by Jesus (John 17). This paper has offered a theological reflection on the nature and purpose of church leadership and mission, grounded in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the prophetic tradition, and the apostolic vision of unity. It has challenged church leaders to repent of divisive practices and to embrace a model of leadership rooted in servanthood, humility, and reconciliation, to transform society through the gospel. The Church is uniquely positioned to be a force for peacebuilding and social transformation, bringing hope to the hopeless, showing the love of Christ to the poor and dying, and bringing joy to the crying. This is particularly important for the South Sudan church to embrace. By reclaiming its prophetic voice, living out the gospel of peace, and engaging in community-based development, the Church can help heal the nation's wounds and guide it toward a more just and united future. As David declared, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity" (Psalm 133: 1). And as Christ prayed, "that all of them may be one... so that the world may believe" (John 17: 21). May the Church in South Sudan rise to this calling—renewed, reconciled, and ready to lead the nation toward peace.

Abbreviations

NCKK	National Council of Churches in Kenya
DRC	Dutch Reformed Church
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
NSCC	New Sudan Council of Churches
ELIJAH	Equality, Legislative, Incarnation, Justice, Apportionment, and Holistic Transformational Model

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Biography



Daniel Ajak Magai is an academic and development professional with extensive experience in research, humanitarian intervention, peacebuilding, and Christian leadership. He currently serves at UNHCR in South Sudan, leading strategic planning and policy engagement on inclusion of displaced population and mainstreaming global initiatives and policies in national planning and development initiatives. He has a humble background, including founding educational and social transformation institutions dedicated to fostering ethical leadership, social transformation, and theological training. His academic background includes three Master's: in Global Leadership (Fuller), Development Studies (UCU), International Relations (OCU), and a Bachelor of Nouthetic Counselling (Christian Life Teachings Bible College). He is pursuing a Ph.D. at EUCLID University alongside Christian Leadership Research at the Open Christian University. His research interests and scholarly works lie at the intersection of religion, ethics, and leadership, with a focus on conflict resolution, transformational development, foreign policy, humanitarian interventions, and peacebuilding.

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