

## **PRIESTS' LEADERSHIP STYLES AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH ACTIVITIES IN THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF MERU, KENYA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The main objective of this study was to establish the influence of priests' leadership styles on the youth participation in church activities in the Catholic Diocese of Meru, Kenya. The study addressed four styles of leadership which include servant leadership, transformational leadership, entertainment leadership and the charismatic leadership. Descriptive cross-sectional survey design was used. The research instruments included questionnaires, interviews and focused group discussion (FGD). The sample size comprised of forty eight (48) priests, who included thirty two (32) diocesan priests and sixteen (16) missionary priests. Information from priests was gathered by use of questionnaires. The sample also included (41) members of the church youth who were in seven (7) focused group discussions. The key finding of this study is that there is a perception divide between the priests and the youth of Catholic Diocese of Meru as to the leadership style that is appropriate for the youth in order to motivate and inspire them to participate in church activities. The findings reveal that priests prefer and practice servant leadership while the youth prefer entertainment leadership. This shows divergence in what the priests ordinarily apply on the youth compared to the expectations of the youth. It is recommended that the church management should initiate transformative programmes geared towards harmonization of the leadership style applied on the youth by the priests and the leadership style preferred by the youth in the church. This will ensure that the youth who are the future of the church continue to participate in church activities.

**Key words:** Leadership, church leadership, servant, transformational, charismatic, entertainment

### **I NATURE OF THE PROBLEM**

Increasingly, research on leadership is focusing on varying leadership styles and their appropriateness to the situation of the moment and the group being led. Eric (1993) postulates that how a person is expected to manage a group is dependent on the group members' perception of their own power. For instance, the style of leadership employed to a group of people who perceive themselves as equal to the leader may substantially differ from that used on a group that is considered inferior to the leader. Similarly leadership in a multicultural setting is considerably more complex than leadership in a culturally homogeneous group (Eric, 1993).

The question of ethical leadership has been raised in many quarters for a variety of reasons. In the past years, the fall of corporate leaders, both sacred and secular, has created a climate of disillusionment in society (Niewold, 2006). Taylor (2002) surmised that after decades of research to find the best or most effective leadership style that no style had emerged as the best in all situations. The style that individuals use will depend on a combination of factors such as their beliefs, values and preferences, as well as the organizational goals, culture and norms which will favour some styles and discourage others.

Richards and Martin (1981) stress the equipped model of leadership and see leadership as mainly servant-hood leadership which is the model for Christian leadership. It is the antithesis of power. Rather than having the right to control others, a servant leader lives his/her life under the control of another's. Rather than being superior, a servant spends his/her life ministering among others. In other words, servant-hood leadership means spending time to train or to show how ministry may be carried out. This type of leadership does not exercise authority over others. This is the kind of leadership Jesus recommends for his followers (Mathew 20: 28).

Shawchuck and Heuser (1993) asserted that Christian leadership is not merely management, not merely equipping, but the two can hardly be separated. They assert that leadership is seeing that the right things are done and that Christian leadership seeks the revisions of the process and the structure required by an ever-changing reality.

Servant-leaders achieve results for their organizations by giving priority attention to the needs of their colleagues and those they serve. Servant-leaders are often seen as humble stewards of their organization's resources: human, financial and physical (Greenleaf, 2012). They aim at empowering followers and this allows the servant leader to act on his/her embedded values (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999).

According to Bass (1990) transformational leadership occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group. This transcending beyond self-interest is for the group, organization, or society (Bass, 1990). In essence, transformational leadership is a process of building commitment to organizational objectives and then empowering followers to accomplish those objectives (Yukl, 1998).

The entertainment model readily accepts the values of the consumer culture (Robbins, 1990). This model depends on programmes and activities, and is therefore advertised like any other secular club. The youth worker's commitment is measured according to the annual programmes or events. The participants are evaluated on the basis of the events one has attended in a year, and whether he/she listens to Christian music or wears a Christian bracelet (Robbins, 1990). According to Michael (2005), entertainment leadership style concentrates largely on recreational programmes, events, and activities and therefore cannot be reasonably expected to bring the youth into spiritual maturity with God. Some attention may be given to Bible study, discussions and social-service projects, but these will usually not be the priorities because the focus is more on entertainment than

spiritual growth. This view is reinforced by Reid (1979) who observes that churches that run social activities only must be quite clear that they will not win people for Christ, but for the entertainment. Charismatic leaders pay a great deal of attention in scanning and reading their environment, and are good at picking up the moods and concerns of both individuals and larger group. They then proceed to adapt their actions and words to suit the situation. They often win trust of their followers through visible self-sacrifice and taking personal risks to safeguard their beliefs. One may observe that charismatic leadership motivates followers to give extra output than what is otherwise expected from them. It also achieves self-actualization in its followers (Jung and Sosik, 2006). It is seen that charismatic leadership works in a social structure to heighten the morale of the followers and thus shapening the society the way the followers and the leader had dreamt.

As the Church continues to grow and expand throughout the world, the need for effective leadership has increased (Cooley, 2005). This need is being fulfilled by both the clergy and members of their congregation. The Church has consistently taught that all members have the potential to be effective leaders. They must however perceive all leadership positions in the church as an opportunity to serve and not as an opportunity to 'lord it over' others and to enrich themselves. This means that those willing to assume ecclesiastical leadership responsibilities must be prepared to do it on voluntary terms, absolutely with no monetary gain.

Clergy leadership style and practice have been correlated with Church growth and congregant commitment (Freeman, 2007). The Catholic Church in Meru has undergone tremendous growth both in terms of membership and institutional capacity. The youth are the future of any organization, may it be religious or secular. However, youth commitment in church affairs is causing anxiety among the clergy. They are conspicuously missing in action across a good number of parishes. This is an issue of great concern to the church as it impacts negatively on the future membership and leadership of the church making the expression that the church is always one generation to extinction be a reality (Gwendo, 2012).

Kinnaman (2012) observes that six in ten young people will leave the church permanently or for an extended period of time. Allen (2008) notes that one of the main reasons churches are losing young adults and youth is because these generations cannot relate to the church. According to Kinnaman (2012) young people are more likely to consult the internet than their pastor about a religious question. They do not see the church as the sole arbiter of spiritual content. Church leaders therefore need to be equipped to deal with this new 'normal' situation.

Allen (2008) notes that a better way to reverse this trend is the use of good leadership styles which are attractive to the youth. Although the youth are 'tech' savvy they are not necessarily 'truth' savvy and they hold worldviews alien to their upbringing (Kinnaman, 2012). Tan (2009) observes that social networking has to become part of pastoral ministry or the church will find itself increasingly marginalized in the lives of digital narratives. Tan's idea may be adhering to the fact pastoral agents should not be afraid to take advantage of new technologies of their time and blend with leadership in the church especially when leading the youth.

The Diocese of Meru is located in the Eastern Province of Kenya and spans over two counties, namely, Meru and Tharaka Nithi. It is one of the 26 Catholic Dioceses in Kenya, and borders Isiolo

to the North, Kitui to the East, Embu to the South and Nyeri to the West. It has 58 ecclesiastical units known in church parlance as parishes. Currently, it has 187 priests and 299 nuns serving in these parishes and other institutions which offer social services such education and health (Diocese of Meru, 2012). The aspirations and operations of the Diocese of Meru are informed and guided by a vision and mission statements. The vision statement reads “ A diocese that is united, committed and has capacity to propagate the Gospel and the human values” while its mission is “to work for the salvation of humanity through diversified, quality and sound management of pastoral and social development with special emphasis on the poor, marginalized and the oppressed”(Diocese of Meru, 2012).

## **II OBJECTIVES OF THE INVESTIGATION**

The following specific objectives guided the study:

- i. Establish the extent to which servant leadership influences youth participation in church activities in the Catholic Diocese of Meru.
- ii. Determine how transformational leadership influences youth participation in church activities in the Catholic Diocese of Meru.
- iii. Find out how entertainment leadership model influences youth participation in church activities in the Catholic Diocese of Meru.
- iv. Determine in what ways charismatic leadership influences youth participation in church activities in the Catholic Diocese of Meru.

## **III METHODOLOGY**

This investigation adopted a descriptive survey design which Orodho (2003) describes as a method of collecting information by interviewing or administering a questionnaire to a sample of individuals. This research design was appropriate for this study as it focused on collecting information from respondents on their attitudes and opinions on how priests’ leadership styles influence youth participation in church activities. Stratified sampling and simple random sampling were used to identify the respondents. The respondents were grouped into three strata of diocesan priests (n=32), missionary priests (n=16) and youth groups (n=41). Within each stratum, simple random sampling was used to identify the individual respondents. This provided equal opportunity to each individual to be selected for the study (Creswell, 2003).

This research employed a questionnaire, interviews, observation and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as its key data collection instruments. The questionnaires were hand delivered to respective priests accompanied with a self-introduction letter at their respective parishes: 56 priests comprising of 19 missionary priests and 37 diocesan priests. Out of the 56 questionnaires, 48 were successfully completed and returned to the researchers by respondents giving a response rate of 86% (n=48). They comprised of 32 diocesan priests and 16 missionary priests. Focus group discussions were applied on the youth.

The questionnaire was designed for priests to capture data deemed relevant to the study. A five ordered response levels scale was used: 5= strongly agree, 4= agree, 3=not sure, 2=disagree and 1=strongly disagree. The interviews were used on respondents who preferred to volunteer information orally instead of filling it themselves. The researchers found this appropriate considering that majority of the respondents are not office people but field personnel. The same set of statements on the questionnaire was used for the interview sessions. According to Mutai (2000), an interview is in a sense an oral questionnaire. Instead of writing the response, the respondent gave the needed information orally and there was a one-on-one interaction. Observation was used in this study as a distinct way of collecting data by observing the actual activities during field survey. Under the observation method, the researchers participated in the daily life of the people under study, observing things as they were actually happening, listening to what was being said and noting them down without attracting the attention of anyone else.

The focus group discussions (FGDs) aimed at capturing information from the youth considered appropriate to this study. The researchers made sure the FGDs were successful by conducting a prior training of the facilitators; limiting the group to only ten members and putting in place a manual to guide the discussion. The facilitators were also coached on how to explain target groups about the nature of the study and why only a few in the entire community are being asked to participate. They were also cautioned against revealing what was to be discussed to eschew conditioning the group and hence bias the findings. A timetable for the discussion was explained to make sure the participants got all the information they needed to take part in the discussion.

#### **IV FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The first objective was to establish the extent to which servant leadership influences youth participation in church activities in the catholic diocese of Meru. The findings showed that the Priests preferred and practiced servant leadership and they viewed this as the type of leadership for leading the church youth activities. Out of 48 priests, 46 of them agreed that they practiced servant leadership in their pastoral engagement with the youth. Out of 48 priests, 46 of them (98.5%) agreed that they practiced servant leadership in their pastoral activities. This therefore meant that only few priests (1.5%) felt that servant leadership did not exist in youth related activities. The study presented the same questions to the respondents in form of a likert scale, in order to gain in depth information. The results revealed that an average of 4.03 (80.6%) of the priests concurred with the high existence of servant leadership within the management of youth related activities.

However the youth viewed this type of leadership style as the least practical in attracting them to participate in church youth activities. The findings also revealed a conflict of preference for leadership style in managing youth activities. Despite this conflict the youth were still participating in church activities because they felt that transformational leadership closely matched their ideally preferred style of entertainment leadership. These findings concurs with those of Martin Richards (1981) who asserted that rather than being superior, a servant leader spends his/her life ministering among others. In other words, servant hood leadership means spending time to train or to show how

ministry may be carried out. Farling, Stone, and Winston, (1999) argues that servant leaders find the source of their values in a spiritual base with an aim of empowering followers and this allows the servant leader to act on his or her embedded values. However, the youth focus group discussion ranked servant leadership as the least effective in their work in the church. This is already a conflict between the youth and the priests in terms of their opinion on leadership. It is therefore worthy for this perception conflict to be resolved for the purpose of harmony and unity of direction in youth ministry.

The second objective of the study was to determine how transformational leadership influenced youth participation in church activities in the catholic diocese of Meru. The study findings indicated that transformational leadership was the second preferred method of leadership for the priests and they used it in leading youth activities in the church. Priests agreed that they trained youth to be future leaders and they ensured continuity of youth programmes in their absence indicating that they practiced a certain degree of delegation in their work. The findings of the study showed that 88.5% of the respondents agreed to the existence of transformational leadership in youth related activities. The same questions were posed in a likert scale so as to gain further information and the results showed a mean of 3.94 (79.4%) which confirmed that priests trained the youth for future roles and they delegated to ensure continuity of the programmes they are managing within their jurisdiction.

The youth however viewed transformational leadership as the style that was used by the priests in the church while the priests believed that their preferred style was servant leadership. Although the youth preferred to be led by use of entertainment leadership, findings revealed that transformational leadership was one of the leadership styles that was pulling the youth to participate in church activities because they believed that the priests were applying this particular leadership style. During the interview with the youth, they indicated that transformational leadership was practiced by some priests. The youth felt that this is the leadership style which closely matches their expectations of leadership. Across the focus group discussions held there was concurrence among the youth with majority of them saying that priests who practice transformational leadership attracted them more than those who practiced servant leadership. Some of the excerpts of the youth discussions were like...” “...at least this one is better ...it bridges the generation gap...” “... this style goes with times and situations...” “...it is not static ...it is very life to current situations and the happenings in the environment and one can learn new things”. These comments on transformational leadership were reflected in a majority of the discussions and the youth felt attracted to priests who practised the style in running their affairs. These findings are supported by Avolio and Bass (2002) who found that transformational leaders stimulate their followers' efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways. By blending it with entertainment leadership will ensure a balanced outcome and therefore help to avoid the dangers of solely using entertainment leadership as cautioned by Michael(2005) ;and Reid(1979).

The third objective was to find out how entertainment leadership model influenced youth participation in church activities in the Diocese of Meru. The findings indicated that entertainment leadership was the least preferred and used by the priests and they felt it was not an effective way of

leading youth activities in the church. The youth preferred entertainment leadership as the most attractive way of leading them. Majority of the priests did not agree with the need to have more entertainment in the church for the sake of the youth. Overall, the extent of agreement by priests on the application of entertainment leadership was 56.8% while 43.2% of them disagreed. When the same questions were posed on the likert scale, the priests showed variations in their responses especially on the allocation of time for entertainment in the church. This is because 75% of the respondents said that priests' needed to apply entertainment leadership style in running youth activities in the church

Entertainment leadership was preferred by the youth due to their age and the excitement it generates compared to other styles. The discussions with the youth produced views on this leadership style which was contrary to the views and responses from the priests. The youth felt that this is the kind of leadership that can keep them attached to church activities. However, arising from the responses of the priests, they practised this style quite sparingly since they felt it was not an effective method of running youth activities. Some comments from the youth implied that they were looking for a leadership style that will help them vent and release their pressure. The youth said that they wanted a situation where the priests can use music, drama and other forms of entertainment in the church. Some of the excerpts from focused group discussions were very forceful on what they preferred, as follows; *"...this is the kind of style that we need....it reflects our time ....."* *life has changed and our church leaders need to appreciate this fact....and include entertainment in the church"*... *"This is the only way to keep us engaged and interested"*. It can therefore be inferred that if the priests were to apply entertainment leadership style in managing youth affairs in the church, there would be more youth getting involved in church activities than is otherwise the case currently. The youth generally like exciting and vigorous activities, hence their high preference for this leadership style. On the contrary, the majority of the priests did not like entertainment leadership style as an effective way of leading and attracting the youth to participate in the church affairs. According to Michael (2005) entertainment leadership style concentrates largely on recreational programmes and may not be expected to reasonably bring the youth into spiritual maturity with God. This view is reinforced by Reid (1979) who observes that churches that run social activities only must be quite clear that they will not win people for Christ, but for the entertainment.

According to Shawchuck and Heuser (1993) leadership is seeing that the right things are done and Christian leadership seeks the revisions of the process and the structure required by an ever-changing reality. While priests have a moral obligation to see that the right things are done, they are also obliged to do everything possible to make the youth participate in church affairs. It is appropriate that the priests therefore need to explore ways and means of employing entertainment leadership to attract the youth to participate in church activities without compromising on the core values of the church's mission. This means the entertainment leadership may be used not as an end in itself but as a means to an end.

Finally, the fourth objective was to determine whether charismatic leadership style influenced youth participation in church activities in the Catholic Diocese of Meru. The findings indicated that

charismatic leadership style was also appreciated and practised by the priests and was the third preferred style after servant and transformational. Under the likert scale responses, the priests agreed that they created positive attitude towards youth church activities in an effort to encourage youth participation. The results of the data on a likert scale of 1 to 5 revealed a mean score of 3.95 which means that (79%) of the priests agreed that charismatic leadership was important to leadership and mentoring of youth activities in the church.

The youth felt that some priests applied the charismatic leadership style in managing church affairs. In addition the youth showed preference of priests who had charisma in their leadership. Apart from the influence of transformational style on youth participation in church activities, the next influence came from charismatic leaders' style. The youth appreciated that this style requires gifted priests and they had even to comment and say, " *this one requires a gifted person ...you can't just play it in a charismatic way unless you have innate ability and capabilities*"...*this is good for influencing people to buy ideas... don't think it can be very popular like entertainment style...*" normally leaders with charisma influence people and are able to attract the youth to get involved...". This therefore indicates that charismatic leadership style may not influence the youth to participate in youth activities as can be done through entertainment style.

Charismatic leadership style is special in a way because it requires innate characters of a person. It is therefore a leadership style that may only be posed by naturally gifted priests. The findings agreed with those in DeCelles (2004) who warned that many organizations have witnessed their high ranking leaders going corrupt even when they are charismatic. He further argued that charismatic leaders are excellent communicators and can lure huge following and without any check on their power and influence, it does not take long before the charismatic leader goes corrupt. Therefore DeCelles (2004) recommended that there was need to continually check on extra ordinary behaviors among charismatic leaders.

## **V CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study produced results on the divergence of leadership needs between the priests who are ordinarily above forty years old and the youth who are otherwise young in thought and action. As much as several writers like Robbins (1990), Reid (1979), Yaconelli (1999) and Michael (2005) raise caution against entertainment leadership, there is need to evaluate the proposed cautions and modify entertainment leadership to suit the needs of the youth and the church. The youth focus group discussions revealed that the youth are not interested in a lot of servant leadership because they feel it is too old styled and closes itself from modern developments in the society.

Entertainment style of leadership may be largely responsible for the drifting of a good number of young Kenyans into the Pentecostal churches because their leaders employ more transformational and entertainment leadership while some of them are equally charismatic. This challenge has forced several mainstream churches to adjust their management of youth affairs and hence this study is a big wake-up call to the Catholic Church leadership to establish mechanisms of strengthening the mentorship and leadership of the youth (Michael, 2005). This will help to balance the cultural and

training orientation of the priests and the youth expectations. It is common practice nowadays in Kenya to see parents and their youthful children attending different churches on Sundays and it is all rooted in leadership styles and hence the need for the church leadership to address this conflict and divergence that is even spreading to the families.

The parish management can organize for youth seminars with a target and objective to ensure that the priests convince the youth on what it entails to have servant leadership while the youth also take advantage of the same forum to articulate their views on why they have a lesser liking for servant leadership. Knowing that the youth constitute the future leadership of the church, the Church authorities should take this matter seriously by trying to induct the priests into more modern and acceptable styles of youth management. It is a known fact that the world has become a global village and it is not possible to delineate the church youth from other youth. The media has become a single most influencer of youth lives and perception about life (Wood, 2011). It is therefore good for the priests and church authorities to understand these important components of the youth's living environment. Youth are more aware of their rights and why they need to be led in a style that fits their needs and circumstances.

The findings also revealed the importance of ensuring good practice of leadership not only in the Meru Catholic diocese but also the church fraternity at large. It is recommended that the church leadership in Meru and globally, where practically possible, to engage the youth with an objective of appreciating the leadership divide among the priests and the youth. The youth prefer to be led by use of entertainment style while the priests prefer the more conservative servant leadership. The leadership preferred by the youth is more revolutionary but it fails to accommodate a wide range of interest groups and hence the need to harmonize the leadership orientation of all groups in the church. The youth are the future of the church and it is always good to ensure they develop a sense of belongingness to enable them become constructive in their church involvements.

It is important for the church management to strive to reconcile the huge deviation on leadership perceptions. Although this manifestation is emerging from the youth in Meru Catholic Diocese, it is possible that this could be a global phenomenon which the wider church leadership and community will need to address. From the findings of this study it is clear that there is a leadership divide in the church due to the age gap, training and orientation of the priests.

Charismatic leadership was less preferred by both the priests and the youth, yet it is the leadership that has been used by the most influential leaders of the world like Jesus Christ and other global powerful leaders. The church leadership should be keen to identify priests with charismatic leadership styles and invest in developing them. Such leaders are bound to cut across all ages and race due to their attractive prowess and the ability to use innate abilities to make things happen. Contrary to popular belief that charismatic leaders are mainly in the political arena, the church leadership should appreciate the benefits that this leadership can produce for the general welfare of the church. Transformational and charismatic leadership are central to the success and survival of today's organizations (Jennings, 2002). It seems, however, that their actual potential has not been

recognized by church leaders around the globe. In times of crisis and turbulence in the church these two styles can come in handy.

Talented youthful leaders should be identified by the church and groomed in the church for taking over future church leadership. It is by incorporating such young talented leaders in the church that will make the other youth feel involved and engaged in the church activities. This will be a way of bringing the youth on board to be able to appreciate the mix of leadership needs and challenges for both the youth and the priests and be able to blend them and create leadership harmony.

## **VI SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

There is need to study youth's preference for entertainment leadership more extensively and on a wider scope such as regional and national levels within the catholic fraternity, and by extension, at interdenominational platform with a view of establishing whether it is a countywide phenomenon. Further study on the subject can be done by investigating other closely related variables such as priest's education background, experience and geographical background of the parishes they previously served. This study can be replicated by administering the leadership orientations questionnaire not only to priests but also to lay leaders in the church and catholic teachers who have immense influence on youth.

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