

Missional Leadership in a Post-Secular Context: A Theological and Empirical Case Study of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Eastern Zambia

Christopher Kabwe Mukuka

Rusangu University

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of post-secular societies—where religious and secular worldviews continue to coexist and interact in public life, rather than religion simply fading away—demands a fresh look at Christian leadership. Instead of merely maintaining institutions, leadership today needs to involve the whole faith community in what theologians call the *missio Dei* (Latin for "the mission of God"), the conviction that mission is first and foremost God's own activity, into which the church is invited to participate. This study examines that challenge through a case study of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in Eastern Zambia, a region with about 59,000 members spread across a vast and culturally diverse area stretching from the Luangwa Bridge to Chama District. Using a sequential mixed-methods design, the research first builds a theological framework from Trinitarian and *missio Dei* thinking, and then tests it against real-world data gathered through semi-structured interviews with church administrators, pastors, and lay leaders, alongside participant observation and document analysis. The findings reveal three critical dynamics: 1) a tension between inherited top-down structures and the practical needs of contextual mission; 2) the role of communal, Sabbath-centred discernment as a space where authority can be shared; and 3) the strategic use of digital platforms to coordinate mission across great distances in a network with multiple centres of initiative. The study concludes by proposing a Contextual-Trinitarian Participatory Model for missional leadership, arguing that sustainable leadership in complex post-secular settings requires a theologically grounded commitment to kenotic vulnerability (a leadership posture modelled on Christ's self-emptying, where leaders willingly relinquish control and power for the sake of others), communal praxis (the whole church thinking and acting together), and structural adaptability (systems that bend to support mission, not block it).

Keywords: missional leadership, *missio Dei*, Trinitarian theology, post-secular, Seventh-day Adventist, Zambia, African ecclesiology, contextual mission

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first-century setting for Christian mission is marked by three overlapping currents: post-secularity, globalisation, and digital transformation. Contrary to older theories that predicted the decline of religion, faith continues to have a public voice. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas (2008) captured this when he spoke of a "post-secular" condition, a society where religious and secular ways of reasoning interact rather than exist in separate spheres. This global reality takes unique shape in sub-Saharan Africa, where rapid urbanisation, cultural pluralism, and the lingering effects of colonial history all shape church life. In such an environment, traditional, top-down leadership models often inherited from the colonial mission era struggle to encourage local creativity and relevant mission engagement.

This article addresses that challenge through an in-depth case study of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern Zambia. With about 59,000 members spread across a vast and varied geographical area, this community provides a rich setting for examining how missional leadership actually works on the ground. The study argues that effective leadership must be reimagined as a participatory, Trinitarian practice within God's mission, a model that carries important lessons for large, established denominations navigating the complexities of a post-secular world.

Background to the Study

Global Christianity in the 21st century is shaped by post-secularity, digital change, and a shift in its centre of gravity toward the Global South (Jenkins, 2011). The idea of the post-secular, as explained by Habermas (2008), describes a situation where religious and secular perspectives meet in public life, making the old sharp division between sacred and secular obsolete. This new reality disrupts the way many denominations operate, especially those still influenced by Enlightenment-era institutional thinking and, in many African churches, by hierarchical structures inherited from the colonial period (Kā Mana, 2004; Bowers du Toit, 2017).

At the same time, the theological concept of *missio Dei* has reshaped the understanding of Christian mission. Mission is no longer seen as a programme of the church but as the action of the Triune God in the world, action into which the church is invited to join (Bosch, 2011; Goheen, 2014). This shift requires a corresponding change in how we think about church leadership. Leadership becomes less about running an institution and more about helping a community discern where God is already at work and how they can participate (Roxburgh, 2015; Niemandt, 2019). Trinitarian theology, with its emphasis on the mutual indwelling, love, and shared authority of Father, Son, and Spirit a relationship captured by the term *perichoresis* (a Greek word that pictures the persons of the Trinity living in one another in a dynamic, self-giving dance of unity and love) offers a compelling model for this new kind of leadership. It favours collaboration, vulnerability, and multiple centres of initiative over rigid hierarchy and control (Volf, 1998; Barentsen, 2021).

In sub-Saharan Africa, these global theological and social currents meet unique local realities. Churches experience rapid growth alongside persistent challenges such as poverty, ethnic diversity, and the legacy of colonial church structures that often imported centralised, clergy-dominated leadership models ill-suited for deep local engagement (Katongole, 2017). The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, with its strong worldwide structure and major presence across Africa, illustrates this tension well. Its system values uniformity and top-down authority, yet its missional fruitfulness on the ground increasingly depends on local adaptability, lay empowerment, and genuine engagement with pressing community concerns (Branson & Martínez, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Despite a widespread theological agreement on the importance of *missio Dei* and the appeal of Trinitarian leadership models, a significant gap remains between theory and practice, especially in large, established denominations operating in post-secular and post-colonial contexts. There is a disconnect between the participatory, contextual, Spirit-led leadership implied by *missio Dei* theology and the often rigid, institutional, programme-driven models that still dominate daily practice (Van Gelder & Zscheile, 2011; Hendriks, 2015).

This problem comes into sharp focus in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern Zambia. With about 59,000 members scattered across an immense and diverse territory, the church faces the concrete challenge of leading a huge, geographically dispersed community in mission that is both effective and sensitive to local contexts. The existing hierarchical structure provides necessary order and doctrinal unity, but it can also stifle local initiative, fail to draw on the wisdom of the whole community, and struggle to respond nimbly to the distinct opportunities and needs found in settings ranging from Luangwa to Chama.

The central research problem this study addresses, therefore, is: How can the leadership of a large, structured denomination like the SDA Church in Eastern Zambia genuinely embody a Trinitarian-participatory model of missional leadership that bridges the gap between its necessary institutional organisation and the demands of contextual, post-secular mission? The study specifically examines the tensions between hierarchy and contextual adaptation, the role of digital platforms in forming leadership networks, and the potential of existing communal practices (such as Sabbath observance) to become spaces for shared discernment and missional innovation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Missional Theology and Ecclesial Leadership in a Post-Secular Age

Scholarly discussion of Christian mission has been fundamentally reshaped by the *missio Dei* paradigm, which places the origin and driving force of mission within the life of the Triune God (Bosch, 2011; Wright, 2006).

This theological move relocates the church from being the initiator of mission to being a participant in God's redemptive action, a shift that deeply challenges institution-centred and clergy-centred leadership models (Goheen, 2014). At the same time, the rise of post-secular societies, where religious and secular ways of thinking interact dynamically, demands a leadership that is conversational, humble, and contextually aware rather than defensive or triumphalist (Berger, 2014; Habermas, 2008).

In response, recent scholarship calls for a rethinking of church leadership as a facilitative practice shaped by a Trinitarian imagination. Niemandt (2019) and Roxburgh (2015) argue that effective missional leadership is less about managing an organisation and more about creating environments where the whole community can listen for the Spirit's guidance. This aligns with a broader critique of hierarchical models, with empirical studies suggesting that collaborative and shared leadership structures are linked to higher levels of congregational innovation and contextual engagement (Eva et al., 2019; Branson & Martínez, 2011).

African Ecclesiology and the Post-Colonial Leadership Dilemma

The African setting introduces a vital layer of complexity to this global conversation. A substantial body of literature examines the enduring impact of colonial mission structures, which often put in place centralised, clergy-driven, and hierarchical church systems that sidelined local communal leadership (Kā Mana, 2004; Bowers du Toit, 2017). This historical legacy creates an ongoing tension for African churches, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which must navigate imported institutional forms while searching for authentically African expressions of faith and leadership.

Contemporary African theology, with its emphasis on communal identity (often captured by the term ubuntu—"I am because we are"), storytelling, and holistic salvation, offers both a powerful critique and an alternative foundation for leadership (Katongole, 2017; Ukpong, 2000). Scholars such as Hendriks (2015) argue that leadership in African Christianity must move beyond simply maintaining inherited systems and instead become a catalyst for contextual theologia—theological reflection that arises from and addresses local realities. This calls for leaders who serve as bridges between cultures and facilitators of communal wisdom, a role often at odds with traditional, authority-centred models.

Digital Mediation and the Reshaping of Ecclesial Networks

The digital transformation of society has become an unavoidable dimension of contemporary missional leadership. Research on religion and digital culture shows that communication technologies are not neutral tools; they actively shape community practices, the flow of authority, and how identity is formed (Campbell, 2020; Hutchings, 2021). Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and SMS broadcasting enable decentralised, rapid, and multi-centred communication, effectively creating "networked" or "web-like" church structures that operate alongside and sometimes challenge formal hierarchies (Anderson, 2022; Campbell & Garner, 2019).

In settings such as Eastern Zambia, where geography poses a major obstacle, these technologies are indispensable for coordination. The literature suggests that such digital networks can foster a more participatory and responsive form of leadership by enabling lateral connections, shared learning over distances, and grassroots mobilisation (Branson & Martínez, 2011). At the same time, challenges arise relating to digital literacy, the spread of misinformation, and the potential for these platforms to reinforce existing social divisions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study sits at the intersection of three theoretical streams, which together provide the lenses for analysing the case study data and constructing the proposed model.

Trinitarian Theology as a Relational Foundation for Leadership

The primary theological framework is drawn from the doctrine of the Trinity, specifically the idea of perichoresis—the mutual indwelling and reciprocal relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This offers a normative model for leadership, moving from a single-centre authority to shared, relational, and self-giving power (Volf, 1998). In this view, leadership is not a position of power over others but a dynamic of power

exercised within a community, mirroring the inner life of God. This directly challenges hierarchical and individualistic leadership styles, insisting that authority is most authentically expressed through collaboration, vulnerability (Bowers du Toit, 2021), and communal listening for the Spirit's work (Kärkkäinen, 2002).

Post-Colonial Theory and Hybridity

To critically analyse the SDA Church's structure in Eastern Zambia, the study employs post-colonial theory. This framework highlights the hybrid nature of post-colonial institutions, where imported colonial forms (like the centralised field system) coexist and interact with indigenous African communal values and practices (such as the emphasis on community, oral narrative, and relational authority) (Bhabha, 1994; Kā Mana, 2004). The theory helps name the inherent tensions and also the creative possibilities within this hybridity, framing the leadership challenge not as a simple choice between tradition and modernity, but as a complex negotiation of identity, power, and contextual relevance.

Network Theory and Polycentric Organising

To make sense of the empirical reality of digital and social connections within the field, the study uses network theory. This social-scientific framework analyses organisations as webs of nodes (individuals, groups) and ties (relationships, communications) rather than as top-down pyramids (Castells, 2010). A polycentric network a system with multiple centres of initiative and influence serves as a key analytical model (Anderson, 2022). This theory provides the vocabulary to describe how digital tools are creating a de facto polycentric structure within the formally hierarchical SDA system, allowing the study to trace how information, authority, and innovation flow or are blocked through both official and informal channels.

METHODOLOGY

This research was guided by the central question: How can the leadership of a large, structured denomination like the SDA Church in Eastern Zambia authentically embody a Trinitarian-participatory model of missional leadership that bridges the gap between its necessary institutional polity and the demands of contextual, post-secular mission? To address this complex question, which intertwines normative theology with empirical practice, the study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach was structured as a single, instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) of the Eastern Zambia SDA Field, using this specific setting to generate insights into the wider phenomenon of missional leadership in post-colonial, post-secular contexts.

Research Design and Rationale

The sequential design proceeded in two distinct but interconnected phases.

Phase One (Theological-Constructive) established the normative theological framework. This involved a systematic analysis of key theological literature on *missio Dei*, Trinitarian theology, and missional ecclesiology (e.g., Bosch, 2011; Volf, 1998; Niemandt, 2019). The purpose was not merely to review existing writings but to construct a coherent theological lens: the Contextual-Trinitarian Participatory Model (CTPM) in its provisional form. This model, drawn from Scripture and tradition, provided the evaluative criteria and sensitising concepts (Bowen, 2006) for the second phase, ensuring the empirical inquiry was theologically informed.

Phase Two (Qualitative-Empirical) explored the lived reality of leadership within the case. This phase used qualitative methods to gather rich, contextual data on leadership practices, challenges, and innovations. The instrumental case study approach was chosen because the Eastern Zambia Field, with its 59,000 members, vast geography, and inherited hierarchical structure, serves as a critical example of the tensions facing global denominations. Insights from this case are therefore "instrumental" for understanding the wider problem (Stake, 1995).

Phase Two: Data Collection Methods

Data collection for the empirical phase was triangulated across three sources to ensure validity and depth (Flick, 2018).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Fourteen key informants were purposively selected to represent the broad leadership ecosystem within the field. Selection criteria included formal role, geographic location (covering both urban and remote rural districts), and recognised influence in digital or lay circles. The sample comprised:

- a) Field Administrators (n=2): President and Executive Secretary/Treasurer, to understand strategic vision and institutional constraints.
- b) District Pastors (n=6): Serving in both urban and remote rural districts, to capture the frontline challenges of contextual application.
- c) Departmental Directors (n=3): Leaders of Youth, Women's, and Personal Ministries, to explore specialised missional initiatives.
- d) Influential Lay Leaders (n=3): Respected elders, community leaders, and digital group administrators, to ensure perspectives from outside the formal clergy structure were included.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and followed a protocol designed to probe themes of authority, decision-making, innovation, technology use, and engagement with local community needs. All interviews were conducted in the participant's preferred language (English, Nyanja, or Chichewa), audio-recorded with informed consent, and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Participant Observation

Over an eight-week period, the researcher engaged in observation at multiple levels of church life:

- a) Formal Leadership Settings: Attending Executive Committee and Pastoral Workers' meetings to observe institutional decision-making processes.
- b) Missional Planning Sessions: Observing local church board meetings and evangelism campaign planning.
- c) Communal Worship and Praxis: Participating in Sabbath worship services, Sabbath School classes, and weeknight prayer meetings to understand the communal rhythms where leadership is exercised and received.

Detailed field notes captured interactions, power dynamics, communication flows, and the integration (or disconnect) between formal agendas and grassroots concerns.

Document and Digital Artifact Analysis

A review of strategic documents-five-year strategic plans, Field session reports, and ministerial manuals provided insight into the official polity and stated goals. Importantly, with participant consent, the study also analysed digital artifacts, including the content and interaction patterns within official WhatsApp groups used for pastoral coordination and district communication. This made it possible to map the de facto, technology-mediated network structure that exists alongside the formal organisational chart.

Data Analysis

All qualitative data (interview transcripts, field notes, documents, and digital artifacts) were imported into NVivo software for systematic management and analysis. Thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed:

- a) Familiarisation: Immersion in the data through repeated reading and reviewing of field notes and transcripts.
- b) Initial Coding: Generating initial codes from the data, loosely guided by the sensitising concepts from Phase One (e.g., "communal discernment," "hierarchical tension," "digital coordination").

- c) Searching for Themes: Collating codes into potential themes, such as “Brokering Between Structure and Context,” “Sabbath as a Missional Commons,” and “The WhatsApp Episcopacy.”
- d) Reviewing Themes: Checking themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they were coherent and well-grounded.
- e) Defining and Naming Themes: Refining the essence of each theme and generating clear definitions.
- f) Producing the Report: Weaving the thematic analysis together with the theological framework from Phase One.

The final analytical step involved a theoretical dialogue, in which the emergent empirical themes were critically compared and integrated with the provisional CTPM. This iterative process ensured that the final model was both theologically grounded and empirically substantiated, rather than being imposed on the data.

Case Study: The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern Zambia

Contextual Description: A Hybrid Ecclesial Ecology

The Eastern Zambia SDA Field, with its 59,000 members, offers a powerful miniature portrait of the challenges facing the global church. Its context is shaped by three intersecting realities that together create a hybrid ecclesial ecology.

- a) Post-Colonial Institutional Legacy: The inherited hierarchical structure, with clear lines running from field president to local elder, is a classic product of the *missio ecclesiae* model (a mission centred on the church as institution), emphasising control, uniformity, and institutional expansion. This structure, established during the colonial mission era, often operates with an unspoken assumption that the institution is the primary agent and guarantor of mission.
- b) Socio-Geographic Complexity: The territory spans from areas near urban Lusaka to remote farming communities in Chama. Such diversity does not allow for a one-size-fits-all missional strategy; instead, it demands a contextual intelligence that can address urban poverty, rural development, ethnic pluralism, and varying levels of engagement with traditional worldviews.
- c) Indigenous Communal Ethos: Operating alongside and sometimes against the imported hierarchy is a strong African communal spirit, captured by the concept of *ubuntu* (“I am because we are”). This ethos naturally promotes shared life, oral theological reflection, and communal decision-making—values that align deeply with a *missio Dei* and Trinitarian vision. However, rigid bureaucratic systems frequently hinder their expression.

This hybrid ecology, marked by the coexistence of a colonial-era hierarchy, complex local contexts, and an indigenous communal spirit, sets the stage for the leadership tensions and innovations this study uncovers.

Findings and Analysis: Negotiating the Hybrid Ecology

The three findings are not isolated observations but interrelated responses to this hybrid setting.

Structural Tension and Adaptive Praxis: Leaders as Theological Brokers

The tension reported in the study is, at its heart, theological: it is the lived friction between *missio ecclesiae* (institution-centred mission) and *missio Dei* (God’s contextual mission). The most effective leaders did not simply choose one side over the other; instead, they engaged in adaptive praxis. They acted as theological or missional brokers a deeper role than mere cultural mediation. Their task was to interpret top-down policies through the lens of local need (contextualisation) and, simultaneously, to translate grassroots missional insights into the institutional language of reports and plans (legitimation). For example, a pastor might frame a local youth farming cooperative not just as livelihood training but as a “ministry of stewardship and community

wellness,” thereby meeting institutional reporting requirements while advancing a holistic mission. This brokering is a kenotic practice: leaders empty themselves of rigid institutional authority so that space can open up for local, Spirit-led innovation.

Communal Discernment and Sabbath as Missional Commons

This finding is perhaps the most theologically significant. The study identifies Sabbath worship, and particularly Sabbath School, as an organic, underutilised architecture for participatory leadership. This space functions as a missional commons a shared resource where the priesthood of all believers can be exercised. Here, leadership authority is radically redistributed. The pastor’s role shifts from being the sole authority to being a facilitator of communal hermeneutics (the community’s shared interpretation of Scripture and life). When a Bible study on the Good Samaritan sparks a lay-led initiative to care for AIDS orphans, it represents *missio Dei* welling up from the discernment of the whole body. This practice embodies a pneumatological ecclesiology (an understanding of the church centred on the active presence of the Holy Spirit), where the Spirit speaks through the collective, providing a powerful, indigenous counter-narrative to clergy-centred models and creating a grassroots system of checks and balances on hierarchical authority.

In the context of Eastern Zambia, this missional commons can be intentionally activated to address some of the community’s most urgent and often invisible needs. For example, a Sabbath School class studying Luke 10:25–37 might move beyond cognitive reflection to communal action by asking, “Who is lying wounded on our own Jericho road today?” Out of such discernment could emerge a coordinated initiative for street children. One practical expression, observed in early form in several congregations, is a “Wash for Dignity” project: church members voluntarily bring their vehicles to a designated location after Sabbath services, and street children, organised and mentored by lay leaders, wash the vehicles. The funds earned are not given as a handout but placed into a transparently managed savings and skills-training fund for each child. This simple act accomplishes multiple things at once: it restores agency and dignity to the children, builds genuine social connections between the congregation and the street community, and transforms a passive charity mindset into a structured, participatory service (*diakonia*). Sabbath School thus becomes not just a place for Bible study but an incubator for contextual mission.

Similarly, the missional commons can confront the reality of single mothers who, in the absence of church or social support, have been pushed into transactional sex work for survival. The same Spirit-led communal discernment can give birth to an alternative economy of care. A Sabbath School class that genuinely facilitates the priesthood of all believers might identify skilled women within its own fellowship and the wider community and conceive a cooperative enterprise, such as a shared tailoring, catering, or small-scale poultry project. In this model, the church building or a member’s property becomes a micro-business hub during the week, with seed capital raised through the missional commons itself (for instance, a “Nehemiah Offering” dedicated to community economic empowerment). The women are disciplined and economically equipped at the same time; they are not objects of charity but co-creators of a new community reality. The Sabbath School discussion group becomes a place of ongoing mutual accountability, where the women share their challenges and the community problem-solves together. Here, *ubuntu* is not simply a cultural value but a theological practice -the body of Christ functioning as an organic, interdependent family. Such initiatives show that the missional commons, when taken seriously, transforms the local church into a centre of holistic salvation that addresses both spiritual and material bondage with equal resolve.

Digital Polycentricity: The Emergence of a Networked Ekklesia

The widespread use of WhatsApp and SMS is not merely a logistical detail. It has generated a *de facto* networked ecclesiology that operates alongside the formal hierarchy. This digital layer creates a polycentric (multi-centred) communication system, enabling rapid, lateral connections across vast distances. It flattens hierarchies, allowing a lay leader in a remote area to share a prayer request or a successful ministry idea with peers across the field immediately, bypassing slower, official channels. This digital *ekklesia* (digital assembly) facilitates a more agile, responsive missional posture. For instance, the “Wash for Dignity” model, once tried in one congregation, can be shared via a WhatsApp broadcast to district lay leaders within minutes, sparking rapid contextual adaptation across the field without waiting for a top-down training cycle.

However, this polycentric freedom also brings a distinct pastoral challenge: the posting of offshoot messages-content that drifts from the group's missional purpose, introduces unverified teachings, or sows division. In an inherited hierarchical mindset, the instinct is to delete the message and silence the sender through administrative authority. Yet such a response contradicts the participatory, Trinitarian ethos the CTPM seeks to cultivate, and it often drives dissent underground rather than healing it. A missional approach to offshoot messages instead uses communal discernment and pastoral accompaniment within the digital space. Concretely, this involves three integrated practices. First, each official group adopts a collectively crafted, brief "digital covenant" rooted in the church's mission statement, making clear that the space exists to build up the body and coordinate mission, not to debate non-essential doctrines or forward sensational material. Second, trained Digital Deacons/Elders serve not as censors but as gentle shepherds of the conversation: when an offshoot message appears, they respond with a private, respectful message to the individual, thanking them for their passion and guiding them to a more appropriate forum-perhaps a designated "Questions and Conversations" group or a one-on-one Bible study-while publicly posting a brief, grace-filled reminder of the group's purpose to re-centre the conversation. Third, if a message contains genuinely concerning content, the Digital Deacon brings the matter to a small group of spiritually mature members for discernment, mirroring the Sabbath School missional commons. This group then prayerfully crafts a response that addresses the substance of the concern without attacking the person, modelling constructive, truth-in-love dialogue. In this way, offshoot messages are transformed from threats to order into opportunities for discipleship, communal learning, and the deepening of a shared missional identity. The digital ekklesia thus becomes a school of character where the community learns to navigate diverse voices while remaining centred on Christ and His mission.

Despite these safeguards, challenges remain for digital discipleship: cultivating theological depth, sustaining accountability, and maintaining Christ-centred community in these fluid, informal spaces requires intentional, ongoing investment, not a one-time policy. The digital commons, like the Sabbath School class, thrives when shepherded by humble, kenotic leaders who trust the Spirit's work in the whole body.

Toward a Contextual-Trinitarian Participatory Model (CTPM)

The CTPM presented here is the constructive synthesis emerging from this analysis. It is a framework for intentionally leading within the hybrid ecology, moving from an accidental adaptation to a theologically coherent strategy.

- a) **Theological Core:** The model is grounded in the perichoretic relationality of the Trinity. This directly counters the impersonal, bureaucratic logic of the inherited system with a theology of mutual indwelling, shared authority, and self-giving love.
- b) **Leadership Posture:** Kenotic vulnerability is the essential personal stance. It calls leaders to consciously lay aside the power imbalances rooted in colonial and clergy-centred history, empowering them to broker, facilitate, and learn from the community.
- c) **Central Practice:** Structured communal discernment makes the theological core operational. It proposes intentionally using existing "missional commons" like Sabbath School as spaces for strategic missional visioning-spaces that can generate concrete initiatives such as "Wash for Dignity" or single-mother cooperatives.
- d) **Organisational Structure:** An intentionally polycentric network is the structural expression. It calls for the formal recognition and strategic resourcing of the organic digital and communal networks, integrating them into the governance system so that locally discerned mission models can spread and be supported more rapidly.
- e) **Missional Telos:** Success is defined by contextual holistic flourishing. The metrics expand beyond mere membership or baptism counts to include restored childhoods, dignified livelihoods, social reconciliation, and community shalom as tangible signs of God's redeeming mission.

Implications and Actionable Solutions

The conclusions of this study carry significant implications for denominational practice, leader formation, and theological method. To move from diagnosis to implementation, the table below outlines specific, actionable solutions derived from the CTPM’s dimensions, explicitly incorporating the pragmatic initiatives and the pastoral handling of offshoot digital messages.

CTPM Dimension	Core Issue Addressed	Proposed Actionable Solutions
<p>1. Formational Shift (Towards Facilitative Leadership)</p>	<p>Leaders trained primarily as preachers or managers lack skills to facilitate communal discernment and broker institutional-local tensions.</p>	<p>A. Revise seminary and in-service curricula to include mandatory modules on communal discernment practices (e.g., SWOT analysis in a theological framework), intercultural communication, and adaptive leadership. B. Create “Pastor-Theologian” apprenticeships, pairing new pastors with experienced “broker” leaders to model contextual negotiation and theological reflection on local issues, including the design of income-generating missions like car-wash projects. C. Develop lay facilitator training to certify members to lead Sabbath School as a missional incubator, using guided questions to move from Bible study to concrete community action plans such as a single-mothers’ cooperative.</p>
<p>2. Structural Innovation (Legitimising Polycentricity)</p>	<p>The formal hierarchy is ill-suited for rapid, contextual response and often stifles grassroots innovation emerging from digital or communal networks.</p>	<p>A. Establish a “Polycentric Innovation Fund,” a simplified grant system for lay-led initiatives (e.g., seed money for a tailoring cooperative or car-wash supplies) proposed and vetted within local Sabbath School or digital group forums, with reporting focused on holistic impact stories. B. Formalise digital ministry roles by appointing and training Digital Deacons/Elders with clear mandates to moderate official communication groups, foster spiritual community online, rapidly disseminate proven missional models (“Wash for Dignity” toolkits), and pastorally handle offshoot messages through private, grace-filled redirection, a collectively discerned digital covenant, and small-group discernment when serious concerns arise. C. Implement “Polycentric Reporting,” supplementing traditional statistical reports with qualitative “narrative reports” that capture stories of street children transitioning to stable livelihoods, single mothers establishing sustainable businesses, and digital conversations that led to restored relationships.</p>
<p>3. Contextual Theology</p>	<p>Theology is often treated as a pre-packaged</p>	<p>A. Launch “Contextual Theology Labs,” annual gatherings in each district where pastors and lay leaders use the See-Judge-Act method on a pressing</p>

CTPM Dimension	Core Issue Addressed	Proposed Actionable Solutions
Praxis (Fostering Local Theologia)	doctrine to be applied, rather than a dynamic process emerging from God’s mission in a specific place.	local issue (e.g., the presence of street children, the plight of women in sex work), producing a brief “local theology statement” that biblically grounds the church’s response. B. Create a digital repository of local wisdom using a simple, accessible platform (e.g., a moderated blog or WhatsApp channel) to share models like the car-wash ministry or cooperative structures, including budgets, lessons learned, and testimonies, so that other congregations can adapt them without reinventing the wheel. C. Incentivise theological reflection in preaching by including in pastoral evaluations an assessment of how sermons connect the biblical text to the specific social and economic realities of the local congregation, modelling a hermeneutic that moves from text to communal action.

Way Forward

The proposed CTPM and its accompanying solutions chart a pathway for reform that is both theologically grounded and practically viable. This transition requires courageous leaders who are willing to model kenotic vulnerability by redistributing authority and trusting the Spirit’s work through the entire body of believers. It represents a movement from a culture of control to a culture of empowerment, and from institutional maintenance to missional movement.

Implementing these solutions would enable the Eastern Zambia SDA Field to evolve from a hierarchical organisation managing a territory into a dynamic, polycentric network of missional communities, fully participating in the redemptive mission of the Triune God—a mission that washes cars with street children, launches businesses with single mothers, and transforms digital spaces into arenas of grace-filled discipleship as naturally as it preaches sermons. This case study, therefore, stands as both a critical analysis and a hopeful proposal for the future of the church in a complex world.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the central challenge of missional leadership for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern Zambia, and for similar post-colonial, post-secular settings, is learning to navigate the inherent tension within a hybrid ecclesial ecology. This ecology is composed of an inherited hierarchical institutional model (*missio ecclesiae*), a complex and diverse socio-geographic reality, and a vibrant indigenous communal spirit that resonates with a Trinitarian participatory theology (*missio Dei*). The findings reveal that effective leaders do not choose sides in this tension; rather, they engage in adaptive praxis, acting as theological brokers, facilitating missional commons in spaces like Sabbath School, and navigating emergent digital polycentric networks.

In response, this paper has proposed the Contextual-Trinitarian Participatory Model (CTPM). Grounded in the perichoretic relationality of the Trinity, the CTPM offers a coherent framework that moves leadership from a monocentric, directive style to a polycentric, facilitative one. It synthesises theological conviction (*missio Dei*, *kenosis*) with the empirical realities of the field, arguing that authentic missional leadership is the deliberate art of integrating divine mission with contextual intelligence. The pragmatic initiatives described—the “Wash for Dignity” car-wash project, the single-mothers’ cooperatives, and the pastoral handling of offshoot digital

messages through communal discernment-are not mere add-ons but natural fruits of a missional commons where the whole people of God are empowered to participate in God's redemptive work.

As a single case study, the findings are bound to this specific context, and their direct generalisability to other denominations or regions is limited. However, the principles and the model itself offer transferable insights for any large, structured church seeking to lead more faithfully in a post-secular age. The CTPM therefore provides both a diagnostic lens for understanding current tensions and a constructive, concretely actionable vision for a more agile, participatory, and holistically fruitful missional enterprise.

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