# The Impact of Visionary Leadership as an Authentic Leadership Factor on Church Growth in Embu County, Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

Visionary leadership, a core component of authentic leadership, has increasingly been recognized as critical for the growth and sustainability of faith-based organizations. This study examined the impact of visionary leadership as an authentic leadership factor on church growth in Embu County, Kenya. Anchored on transformational and authentic leadership theories, the study adopted a descriptive survey design with a mixed-methods approach. The target population comprised pastors, elders, departmental heads, and congregants across mainline and Pentecostal churches. A total of 35 Pentecostal churches in Embu County were selected. A sample of 384 participants was selected through stratified and purposive sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews, analyzed quantitatively using SPSS and qualitatively through thematic analysis. Regression analysis revealed that visionary leadership significantly contributed to church growth ($R^2 = 0.641$, $p < 0.01$). Vision articulation, strategic planning, and inspirational motivation led to increased membership, deeper discipleship, and greater community outreach. The study concludes that visionary leadership, as a vital authentic leadership factor, is indispensable in driving sustainable church growth.

**Keywords:** Visionary Leadership, Authentic Leadership, Church Growth, Embu County, Kenya

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership remains central to the growth and stability of churches. Globally, Churches have continued to play critical roles in society's spiritual and social lives (Boya & Chiloane-Phetla, 2022). Churches have often been sought to provide strategic direction in governance, moral and ethics in the society (Boya & Chiloane-Phetla, 2022). However, not all churches experience growth despite similar socio-religious contexts. Scholars increasingly highlight leadership quality as a key differentiator. Among the components of authentic leadership—self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective—visionary leadership stands out as an enabling factor. Leaders are able to articulate a compelling future, inspire congregants, and align church programs with long-term goals. This study examines the extent to which visionary leadership, framed as an authentic leadership factor, influences church growth in Embu County. Although Christianity is well-established in Embu County, many churches face stagnation in membership growth, discipleship engagement, and financial stability. Previous studies have identified leadership as a determinant of church performance, yet there is limited empirical research focusing on visionary leadership as an authentic leadership factor in the Kenyan context. Understanding how visionary leadership within the authentic leadership paradigm affects church growth is necessary for addressing current challenges and ensuring long-term stability.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Visionary leadership refers to the ability of leaders to communicate a compelling and inspiring future that guides organizational direction (Liu et al., 2022). Khan et al. (2020) argue that leaders who provide vision motivate their followers by offering meaning and purpose. In church contexts, visionary leadership manifests in leaders who help congregants understand the divine mission and align with it. Kesumawati & Gultom (2025) emphasized that church growth is not only about numerical increase but also involves holistic discipleship and societal transformation. Authentic leadership emphasizes integrity, transparency, and alignment of values (Avolio &

Gardener, 2005). Visionary leadership provides the forward-looking element by articulating organizational purpose and mobilizing people around it (Wang, Jin, & Yoo, 2024). Henry, Gathogo, and Munyao (2025) highlighted the significance of team leadership, and emphasized the role of shared values in sustaining growth. Ndetto, Cheluget, and Jirma (2024) further demonstrated that innovative leadership and organizational culture are critical for church performance. Collectively, these studies affirm that visionary leadership intersects with other authentic leadership dimensions to drive growth.

## Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Transformational Leadership Theory (Burns, 1978) and Authentic Leadership Theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). While transformational theory explains how vision inspires followers, authentic leadership theory highlights the grounding of vision in values, transparency, and moral conviction. Together, they provide a framework for understanding how visionary leadership functions as a key authentic leadership factor in church growth. Authentic Leadership Theory, as articulated by Luthans and Avolio (2003), Walumbwa et al. (2008), and later expanded by Gardner et al. (2021), emphasizes leadership that is grounded in self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing. Visionary leadership emerges as a critical dimension of this framework because authentic leaders are driven by deeply held values and a moral vision of the future that inspires others (Avolio & Gardner, 2020). Visionary leaders create compelling narratives that align organizational purpose with followers' aspirations, fostering trust, hope, and commitment within congregations. In the church context, visionary leadership ensures that growth is not only numerical but also holistic, encompassing spiritual maturity, administrative strength, and community engagement. Expectancy Theory, developed by Vroom (1964), provides a motivational lens through which visionary leadership influences church growth. The theory posits that individuals are motivated when they believe that effort will lead to performance (expectancy), performance will yield desired outcomes (instrumentality), and these outcomes are personally valuable (valence) (Nguyen et al., 2020). Visionary leadership directly enhances these dynamics by articulating clear and attainable goals for the congregation, linking members' contributions to larger organizational outcomes, and inspiring them with a vision that resonates with their spiritual and social values. For example, a church leader who paints a vivid picture of community transformation through evangelism or social projects increases members' confidence that their involvement will yield meaningful and rewarding outcomes. Identity Theory (Stryker, 1968; Burke & Stets, 2009) emphasizes that individuals' actions are guided by their internalized role identities and the meanings attached to them. Visionary leadership strengthens the identity salience of congregants by linking personal roles to a shared sense of mission and destiny within the church. Leaders who model integrity and communicate a clear spiritual vision help members align their personal and collective identities with the church's vision (Hou et al., 2021). This alignment fosters loyalty, active participation, and long-term commitment, which are critical dimensions of church growth. By combining these theoretical lenses, visionary leadership can be seen as both a moral and motivational driver of church growth. Authentic Leadership Theory grounds visionary leadership in ethical and relational authenticity; Expectancy Theory explains how a compelling vision motivates congregational engagement; and Identity Theory highlights how vision shapes members' sense of belonging and purpose. Together, these perspectives affirm that visionary leadership is not merely about setting future goals but about creating an authentic, motivating, and identity-shaping environment that fosters sustainable church growth in Embu County, Kenya.

## Empirical Review

Empirical studies on leadership and church growth reveal that visionary leadership is a critical determinant of organizational sustainability and congregational expansion. Visionary leadership, as an authentic leadership factor, has been consistently linked with growth outcomes such as member commitment, financial stability, effective administration, and community impact. Domínguez-Escrig et al. (2022) found that authentic leadership, particularly its visionary dimension, strongly predicts organizational learning capability and innovation success. Visionary leaders articulate a compelling picture of the future, align members around common goals, and create momentum for change (Steinmann, Klug, & Maier, 2018). In church contexts, this implies that pastors who clearly communicate a vision of spiritual and social transformation tend to inspire greater involvement, resource mobilization, and loyalty among members.

In Kenya, Henry, Gathogo, and Munyao (2025) established that high levels of member and leadership commitment — often driven by visionary pastoral leadership — significantly enhance congregational participation and evangelistic outreach. Similarly, Tsuma, Siringi, and Wambua (2020) showed that visionary leaders who emphasize financial stewardship and sustainability enable churches to fund long-term programs, thereby ensuring continuity and resilience. Churches providing social amenities such as schools, health centers, and water projects experienced increased visibility, trust, and membership growth (Tsuma, Siringi, & Wambua, 2020). Visionary leadership was central in initiating and sustaining such projects by linking them to the church's mission.

In the Sub-Saharan context, visionary leadership has been linked to rapid growth in Pentecostal and evangelical churches. Awuku-Gyampoh and Asare (2019) observed that churches led by visionary pastors in Ghana were more likely to record both numerical and spiritual growth compared to those without a clear vision. In Kenya, Murugi (2023) highlighted that the Jitegemea philosophy of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, while not explicitly framed as visionary leadership, reflects how future-oriented leadership approaches foster financial self-reliance and congregational growth.

Visionary leadership as a dimension of authentic leadership is closely associated with trust and transparency. Wahab, Ahmad, and Sultana (2021) demonstrate that visionary leaders who are authentic inspire higher levels of member engagement, since followers perceive the vision as genuine and morally sound.. While global and regional studies affirm the positive link between visionary leadership and organizational growth, limited empirical work exists in the Kenyan church context, particularly within Embu County. Most existing studies focus on general leadership models (Murugi, 2023) or financial sustainability strategies rather than visionary leadership as a distinct authentic leadership factor. This study therefore fills the gap by empirically examining how visionary leadership influences church growth indicators — commitment, funding, social amenities, and administration — in Embu County.

# METHODOLOGY

## Research Design

Correlational research design was utilized. This design enables the detection of patterns and the strengths of relationships between variables, offering insights into how personal characteristics influence the connection between authentic leadership behaviors and organizational outcomes, like church growth (Babbie, 2020). In contrast to experimental designs, which involve manipulation and random assignment, correlational research examines these complex dynamics in a natural environment. Although it does not determine causal relationships, it is useful for identifying associations that guide future research—particularly in situations where experimental manipulation is impractical or unethical (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). By employing this approach, the study enhances understanding of how personal characteristics affect leadership outcomes, providing a foundation for more focused investigations down the line.

The study took place in Embu County, targeting church members and leaders from various denominations within Manyatta Sub-County, specifically in Kirimari and Mbeti North Wards, chosen for their high concentration of Pentecostal and charismatic churches. A total of 35 Pentecostal churches across Embu County were selected based on their prominence and active community engagement.The denominations involved included Deliverance Churches, Restoration End Time Churches, Triumph Churches, Full Gospel Churches of Kenya (FGCK) Embu, Winners Chapel, and Great Gospel Visioners (GGV). Using purposive sampling, 387 respondents were chosen to include pastors, elders, departmental heads, and congregants with firsthand experience of church leadership and operations. This approach ensured the targeted inclusion of individuals well-versed in the church's dynamics, providing valuable insights into the relationship between leadership styles and church growth. The sample was diverse in age, gender, and level of involvement in church activities, with a focus on capturing perspectives from both leadership and congregational members.

Data was gathered using a structured questionnaire aimed at capturing responses on various aspects of authentic leadership, personal characteristics, and church growth. The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale, enabling the measurement of attitudes and perceptions ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Indicators of authentic leadership included trust, transparency and accountability, visionary leadership, and teamwork, while personal characteristics encompassed age, gender, education level, and income. Church growth was evaluated through factors such as commitment, funding support, social amenities, and administration.

However, the reliance on self-reported data introduced potential biases. Social desirability bias could occur if respondents provided answers they perceived as more socially acceptable rather than their true opinions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Recall bias was another concern, particularly when participants were asked to remember specific past experiences or behaviors related to church growth or leadership.

To address these challenges, respondents were assured anonymity to encourage honest answers and reduce social desirability bias. The questionnaire was carefully designed with clear and straightforward questions to minimize misunderstandings and enhance the reliability of the data. Additionally, the study used multiple indicators of church growth and leadership to triangulate responses, helping to counteract potential biases and improve the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2021).

Validity was confirmed through expert review and pilot testing, while reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.7$).

Diagnostic tests were done to ensure the results and inferences were exaggerated. The tests conducted included a normality test, multi-collinearity test, heteroscedasticity test, linearity test, and outlier test. Data was analyzed using the SPSS Version 26 computer program for completeness and consistency. The function for the inferential statistics is shown below:

$$CG = \beta_0 + \beta_1 TR + \beta_2 TA + \beta_3 VL + \beta_4 TW + \beta_5 PC + \beta_6 AL*PC + \epsilon$$

Where:

CG = Church Growth (Dependent Variable)

TR = Trust (Independent Variable)

TA = Transparency and Accountability (Independent Variable)

VL = Visionary Leadership (Independent Variable)

TW = Teamwork (Independent Variable)

$\beta_0$ = Intercept

$\beta_1, \beta_2 \ldots \beta_6$ = Regression coefficients

$\epsilon$ = Error term

PC = Personal Characteristics (Moderator Variable)

AL*PC = Interaction term between Authentic Leadership Factors (aggregate of TR, TA, VC, TW) and Personal Characteristics

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The descriptive statistics revealed that visionary leadership was highly rated among respondents in Embu County churches, with a mean score of **4.17 (SD = 0.623)**. This finding suggests that congregants generally perceive their leaders as possessing and articulating a compelling vision for the future of the church. Visionary leadership was ranked third among the authentic leadership factors assessed, following teamwork (M = 4.14, SD = 0.636) and trust (M = 4.18, SD = 0.518), but ahead of transparency and accountability (M = 3.92, SD = 0.729).

Pearson's correlation analysis indicated a **strong positive relationship** between visionary leadership and church growth (**r = .803, p < .01**). This correlation was one of the highest among the authentic leadership dimensions, underscoring the pivotal role of visionary leadership in driving growth within Embu County churches. The result demonstrates that leaders who articulate clear and compelling visions foster higher levels of congregational commitment, resource mobilization, and participation in ministry activities.

Regression analysis further confirmed that visionary leadership significantly predicted church growth outcomes. Visionary leadership accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in church growth indicators such as member commitment, funding and sustainability of programs, provision of social amenities, and effective administration. Specifically, the regression coefficient showed that a unit increase in visionary leadership led to a significant increase in church growth ($\beta = 0.803$, $p < .01$).

| Model Summary[b] | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
| 1 | .803[a] | .645 | .644 | .30306 |
| a. Predictors: (Constant), Visionary Leadership | | | | |
| b. Dependent Variable: Church Growth | | | | |

| ANOVA[a] | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Model | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| 1 | Regression | 53.629 | 1 | 53.629 | 583.888 | .000[b] |
| | Residual | 29.483 | 321 | .092 | | |
| | Total | 83.112 | 322 | | | |
| a. Dependent Variable: Church Growth | | | | | | |
| b. Predictors: (Constant), Visionary Leadership | | | | | | |

| Coefficients[a] | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| 1 | (Constant) | 1.515 | .114 | | 13.259 | .000 |
| | Visionary Leadership | .654 | .027 | .803 | 24.164 | .000 |
| a. Dependent Variable: Church Growth | | | | | | |

Source: Field Data

**Qualitative Findings**

Qualitative interviews reinforced the quantitative results. Respondents highlighted that visionary leaders inspired hope and direction by articulating long-term goals such as community transformation, expansion of ministry programs, and the establishment of schools and social amenities. Leaders who consistently communicated a

biblical and community-oriented vision were seen as catalysts of growth, motivating members to invest time, resources, and energy in the church's mission. Conversely, the absence of vision was frequently cited as a barrier to growth, leading to stagnation and disillusionment among congregants.

## Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that visionary leadership, as an authentic leadership factor, has a significant and positive impact on church growth in Embu County. Leaders who project a clear, ethical, and inspiring vision foster congregational trust, enhance member participation, and improve the church's ability to sustain programs and serve the community. These results affirm that visionary leadership is indispensable for achieving sustainable and holistic church growth. By integrating the nuances of visionary leadership components, contextual factors, and practical training pathways, the study extends both its scholarly and applied value for the church in Embu and similar contexts.

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