



# Hierarchical and Polycentric Leadership in the Church on Congregation Participation

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## **Abstract**

*The church leadership structure is a critical factor influencing congregational involvement. The traditional hierarchical model, which centers on a single authoritative figure, is now widely questioned for its effectiveness in empowering the active participation of all members of the body of Christ. As an alternative, a polycentric (distributed) leadership model that distributes authority based on gifts and functions is increasingly being adopted. However, claims regarding the relative effectiveness of the two models in encouraging congregational participation require systematic study. This study uses a qualitative comparative literature review method. The primary data sources consist of scientific journal articles. The analysis was conducted thematically to identify, compare, and synthesize findings regarding the definition, implementation, and impact of each model on indicators of congregational participation. The study reveals fundamental differences in the philosophy and impact of the two models. Hierarchical leadership tends to create efficiency in decision-making and maintain doctrinal stability, but often limits participation to the implementation of predetermined programs. Conversely, polycentric leadership is significantly more effective in encouraging initiative, creativity, and a sense of ownership among congregations toward ministry. Its success depends heavily on a culture of mutual trust, a clear disciplinary system, and a commitment to nurturing gifts. However, the polycentric model also faces challenges such as potential conflict, slow decision-making, and the need for more intensive coordination. This study concludes that there is no "one size fits all" model. Hierarchical leadership may remain relevant in contexts that require high stability and uniformity, while polycentric leadership excels in building empowering and adaptive communities. The practical implication for the church is the need for a contextual hybrid leadership design that takes the principle of gift distribution from the polycentric model without completely disregarding the clarity of accountability from hierarchical structures. Further research is needed to explore this hybrid model in various denominational and cultural settings.*

**Keywords:** *Polycentric Leadership; Hierarchical Leadership; Church Leadership; Distributed Authority; Congregational Participation.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The debate over the ideal architecture of church leadership continues to rage, between traditional hierarchical monoliths and polycentric leadership ecosystems. The church, as a divine organism and human community, is constantly wrestling with a

challenging dialectic: formulating a form of leadership that is faithful to the biblical mandate while also being responsive to the changing times. This battle is not merely an administrative issue, but a theological struggle that touches the heart of the church's essence—is it more of an institution that requires control or a movement that lives from the dynamics of the Spirit (Wright, 2006)?

For centuries, the hierarchical leadership model—with its rigid pyramid of authority, vertical chain of command, and concentration of power in the clergy—has been the dominant paradigm. This model often sought legitimacy in certain interpretations of the principle of “head and body” and in the values of order and structural accountability (1 Cor. 14:40). However, in recent decades, winds of change—driven by social transformation, the democratization of knowledge, and a longing for authentic spirituality and participatory communities—have brought sharp criticism (Gibbs, 2005; Mercadal, 2021). This criticism is on point: the clergy-laity dichotomy narrows the channels through which the gifts of the Spirit are distributed. This pyramidal structure has been accused of shackling the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9) and reducing the congregation to passive spectators, a form of leadership that Siagian (2021) considers to have strayed from the more participatory biblical model (Siagian et al., 2021).

As an antithesis, the polycentric (or distributed) leadership model emerges as an alternative. Rooted in New Testament ecclesiology about the plural Body of Christ—where each member with diverse gifts has a vital function (Romans 12:4-8; Ephesians 4:11-16)—this model deconstructs the pyramid into a dynamic network. Authority is distributed based on charismata and function, giving rise to an adaptive leadership style that aligns with the concept of adaptive leadership that does not depend on easy answers from a single central leader (Handley, 2021; Wilson, 2022). Its main claim is the liberation of the church's overall potential, encouraging participation that is not only broad but also deep and meaningful, so that everyone finds their place of service and responsibility—a vision also echoed by missiological thinkers such as Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006) who emphasize empowering leadership (Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006).

It is important to note that contemporary academic discourse on polycentric leadership—often framed as a “new paradigm” or “innovative response to the complexities of the 21st century”—comes with a problematic historical amnesia. Long before this term was popularized in organizational leadership literature, discourse on the “polycentric movement” had been explicitly articulated in global ecumenical forums. In

November 2007, Georges Lemopoulos, Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), stated that his institution “has moved decisively from seeing the WCC as the central and privileged instrument of the ecumenical movement towards a vision of a polycentric movement” (WCC, 2007).

What is more significant—and often overlooked in contemporary church leadership discourse—is that the process of “re-envisioning” this polycentric ecumenical movement was led by the Archbishop of the Methodist Church in Nigeria, Michael Kehinde Stephen, a leader from the Global South. He was appointed moderator of the Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century by consensus of the fourteen committee members representing the Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, and Pentecostal churches, as well as regional and global ecumenical organizations (WCC, 2007).

This epistemological irony cannot be ignored: that while theologians and leadership practitioners in the West celebrate the “discovery” of the polycentric model as a response to contemporary complexity, Christian communities in the Global South—Africa, Asia, Latin America—have been leading the polycentric discourse and practice since at least the beginning of the 21st century, even much earlier in their ecclesiological practices that are not documented in international academic databases. By including this genealogy, the study not only enriches the historical review, but also consciously attempts to decolonize the analytical framework that has dominated the discourse on church leadership.

However, the discourse that has developed is often trapped in a dichotomous simplification: hierarchical models are labeled as rigid and outdated, while polycentric models are hailed as free and relevant. Many discussions are stuck in normative rhetoric without the support of systematic empirical-comparative studies. The literature tends to isolate one model, while in-depth analyses comparing the effectiveness of both models in generating and sustaining transformative congregational participation are still rare (Hasiholan, 2023). Participation here is understood to go beyond physical presence or the execution of tasks; it is holistic involvement—from collegial decision-making through the practice of shared discernment (Barton, 2012), organic ministry initiatives, the mobilization of gifts, to a deep sense of ownership of the life and mission of the church.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this academic gap with the core question: “How does the polycentric leadership model compare to the hierarchical model in encouraging

multidimensional congregational participation, based on a synthesis of contemporary ecclesiastical literature?" The specific objectives of this study are to conduct a comparative theoretical analysis of the impact of each model on the dimensions of congregational participation, synthesize contextual factors, determinants of success, and implementation challenges. The significance of this research is, theoretically, to contribute to practical ecclesiology and Christian leadership studies by presenting a comparative analytical framework that can test theological claims with sociological considerations. Practically, the resulting synthesis is expected to serve as a nuanced policy map for church leaders, councils, and synods struggling with structural reform—not merely following trends, but designing governance that truly enables God's people to live as the whole and active Body of Christ.

### **Theological Evaluation Framework: Christ-Centered Leadership Criteria.**

Before empirically comparing the effectiveness of the two models, a normative framework derived from the testimony of Scripture is needed to evaluate the extent to which both hierarchical and polycentric models truly reflect Christ-centered leadership. From a synthesis of contemporary theological literature, at least three evaluative criteria can be identified.

First, Christian leadership is based on calling and character, not merely structural positions. According to Clowney (1995), leadership in the New Testament cannot be separated from covenant ecclesiology, in which the entire congregation is called to hear and do the word. Lee (2021) emphasizes that being a Christian leader is not about fulfilling administrative tasks, but about allowing God to redirect one's identity and character to be in harmony with His plan. Humility, stewardship, and closeness to Christ are non-negotiable foundations. These criteria will test whether a model of church leadership prioritizes the authenticity of calling and character, or whether it absolutizes the legitimacy of structural positions (Clowney, 1995; Lee, 2021).

Second, Christian leadership reverses the logic of worldly power into self-sacrificing service. Bevan (2018) shows that true authority in Jesus' leadership is not obtained through position or control over others, but through a deep relationship with God and the embodiment of love in acts of service. Tangen (2018) warns of two distortions: humanistic reductionism, which reduces the meaning of the cross to mere ethical love, and triumphalistic theology, which offers the illusion of power without

sacrifice. These criteria will test whether a model of church leadership reproduces the patterns of Roman imperial power that Jesus rejected (Luke 22:25-26), or whether it institutionalizes a spirit of service that is willing to suffer (Bevans, 2018; Tangen, 2018).

Third, Christian leadership is participatory and empowers all members of the body of Christ. Huizing (2011) emphasizes that Christian leadership must be directed toward realizing God's mission and authority in every area of life, not concentrating power in the hands of a small spiritual elite. The ecclesiology of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12) clearly teaches that each member is gifted to serve one another, and no one has the right to monopolize the gifts of the Spirit. This criterion will test whether a model of church leadership opens up meaningful participation for the entire congregation, or whether it perpetuates a clergy-laity dichotomy that stifles gifts (Huizing, 2011).

These three criteria—calling and character, sacrificial service, and whole-body participation—will be used to critically evaluate hierarchical and polycentric leadership models in the following discussion. With a clear normative framework, comparative analysis is no longer merely a comparison of organizational efficiency, but a test of both models' fidelity to Christ's mandate.

## **Literature Review**

Amidst the variety of organizational models that exist, hierarchical structures remain a classic framework that has not lost its relevance. This model determines how decisions are made, how communication flows, and how responsibilities are divided within a company (Morales, 2024). So, what makes this structure continue to be used amidst waves of innovation and change? Is its appeal rooted in the clarity of roles and tasks, or in the efficiency of the decision-making process it offers? When we delve deeper into the layers of hierarchical structures, we not only discover their advantages but also the various challenges they present in the contemporary workplace landscape.

Discussions of modern church leadership often begin with theological criticism of hierarchical models that are considered to adopt worldly power structures. Hirsch and Catchim (2012) argue that the church has long been trapped in an “institutional imagination” that borrows leadership models from the Roman Empire, contrary to the radical example of Jesus who rejected the model of “the rulers of the Gentiles” who rule with coercive authority (Luke 22:25-26; (Hirsch & Catchim, 2012). A key critique

highlights how hierarchy perpetuates a sharp clergy-laity dichotomy (Mercadal, 2021), which is foreign to the New Testament, where supreme authority is often centered on a single figure, potentially hindering the full functioning of the body of Christ. Its legitimacy often rests on interpretations of order (1 Cor. 14:40) and the “head and body” metaphor that emphasizes a single source of authority (Hasiholan, 2023).

In response, the polycentric model proposes an alternative biblical foundation. Its main basis is the ecclesiology of the Body of Christ (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27), which emphasizes unity in diversity of function, where each member contributes according to the grace-gifting they have received. The APEST model (Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd, Teacher) from Ephesians 4:11-12 is interpreted not as a hierarchical order, but as five equal and complementary leadership functions to equip the entire congregation (Hirsch & Catchim, 2012). Furthermore, reflections on the nature of the Trinity are used to describe leadership as an interdependent, communal, and mutually submissive relationship, offering an alternative to rigid subordination (Franklin & Niemandt, 2016).

Polycentric leadership distributes authority based on charismata and function, creating a dynamic leadership network rather than a static pyramid (Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006). This model is rooted in the ecclesiology of the Body of Christ, which has many members with diverse roles (Romans 12:4-8) and the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers” (1 Peter 2:9). Leadership is seen as a function possessed by many people, not a limited position.

Operationally, these two models have contrasting characteristics. Leadership is characterized by a centralized, pyramidal authority structure with a clear chain of command. Legitimate authority is primarily attached to a position or role within that structure. Decision-making tends to be done at the top of the hierarchy, with efficiency and uniformity as values that are often prioritized (Handley, 2021). Relationships between leaders are vertical in a superior-subordinate pattern.

In contrast, polycentric leadership operates with a logic of networks and distribution. This model creates multiple centers of influence that are interconnected within a cohesive ecosystem (Handley, 2021; Wilson, 2022).

It is important to note that the academic discourse on polycentric leadership in the Western world—which often frames it as a “new paradigm” or “response to contemporary complexity”—actually comes with a skewed historical awareness. Church

movements in the Global South have been practicing distributed, gift-based, networked leadership models long before these terms became popular in organizational leadership literature. Hastings' (1996) study documents how African Independent Churches (AICs) since the late 19th century have developed a locally autonomous ecclesiology, led by indigenous figures, and empowered the laity—as a form of resistance to Western missionary control (Hastings, 2003). Figures such as Mojola Agbebi in Nigeria in 1894 did not simply establish independent churches, but consciously deconstructed the cultural and structural symbols of colonial Christianity: he discarded Western names, rejected European clothing, and encouraged the creation of original African hymns (Hastings, 2003).

In a different but parallel context, Christian Basic Communities (CEBs) in Latin America have been developing a participatory, synodal, and lay-centered model of church since the 1960s—a “new way of being church” that predates the contemporary polycentric discourse by half a century (Nama, 2024). Recent empirical studies from Southwest Nigeria even explicitly use a polycentric framework to analyze lay mobilization in large Pentecostal denominations such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and the Deeper Life Bible Church (DLBC), showing that this model is not only historical but also contemporary and evolving (Ogunkolati, 2024).

This epistemological irony cannot be ignored: while churches in the Global South grapple with concrete questions about leadership, participation, and mission within their own resources and contexts, global theological knowledge production finds it easier to appropriate concepts from Western organizational theory. By substantially incorporating the Global South perspective, this study not only enriches the literature but also consciously seeks to decolonize the analytical framework that has long dominated the discourse on church leadership.

Authority does not come from position, but from the community's recognition of a person's gifts, expertise, and functions. Thus, decision-making is collaborative and communal, involving shared discretion from various perspectives to reduce strategic “blind spots” (Hasiholan, 2023; Palma, 2022). Relationships between leaders are described as dynamic team relationships, with the principle of mutual submission, where the roles of leading and following can shift according to context and needs (Heintje et al., 2023).

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a comparative systematic literature review method. A qualitative approach was chosen because it aims to deeply understand the phenomenon of church leadership in its theological and practical complexity, rather than testing hypotheses through quantitative measurements. The systematic literature review method allows researchers to transparently and structurally identify, evaluate, and synthesize findings from various literature sources to produce a comprehensive understanding of the comparison between the two leadership models.

### ***Literature Search Strategy***

The literature search was conducted systematically in five major academic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, ProQuest, ATLA Religion Database, and JSTOR. The combination of keywords used in English and Indonesian included: “polycentric leadership” AND church, “hierarchical leadership” AND church, “distributed authority” AND ecclesiology, “kepemimpinan polisentris” AND gereja, “kepemimpinan hirarkis” AND jemaat. The search was also expanded using the snowballing technique by tracing the reference lists of identified key articles.

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

The inclusion criteria included: (1) publication within the last two decades (2000-2025); (2) explicitly discussing hierarchical and/or polycentric leadership models in the context of the church; (3) availability in full text; (4) published in reputable scientific journals, academic books from trusted publishers, or research results (theses/dissertations). Popular literature, opinion articles, and non-academic publications that have not undergone peer review are excluded, unless used as secondary supporting sources.

### ***Data Sources***

The primary data sources for this study consist of reputable scientific journal articles, systematic and practical theology books, and previous research results that specifically discuss hierarchical and polycentric leadership in the context of the church. Secondary sources include supporting literature such as conference proceedings, theses, dissertations, and electronic publications from accredited theological institutions

relevant to the themes of congregational participation, ecclesiology, and contemporary Christian leadership.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

Data analysis was conducted through comparative thematic analysis with the following stages. First, data reduction through initial selection and codification of literature that met the inclusion criteria. Second, data presentation by grouping findings into main thematic categories: definition and characteristics of the model, theological foundations, practical implementation, impact on congregational participation, as well as challenges and success factors. Third, drawing conclusions and verification through cross-tabulation between the two leadership models in each thematic category.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on a comprehensive literature review, the following is a synthesis of key findings and an in-depth discussion of the effectiveness of polycentric and leadership models in encouraging congregational participation.

### **Analysis of the Hierarchical Leadership Model**

The hierarchical leadership model, often visualized as a pyramid with authority flowing from the top down, is not merely a historical coincidence. It is a system built on profound theological claims about the nature of God, the sanctity of truth, and the need for order in the community of faith (Olajide, 2025). This analysis will unravel its supporting claims, examine the biblical basis it proposes, and reveal the criticisms and apologetic responses that shape contemporary discourse.

### **Theological Foundations and Claims of Legitimacy**

The defense of hierarchical structures stems from an institutional ecclesiology that emphasizes stability, continuity, and the preservation of the depositum fidei (heritage of faith) (Sutrisno et al., 2025). In this view, the church as “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15) requires a clear structure to preserve the purity of doctrine from the threat of division and deviation (Hammond, 2021).

The most fundamental biblical basis is taken from the metaphor of “Head and Body” (Ephesians 5:23, Colossians 1:18). In hierarchical interpretation, the image of

Christ as Head is translated into the need for one visible head at every level of the church—just as the head directs the body. The authority of bishops, pastors, or elders is then seen as an extension or representation of Christ's own authority, creating a sacred chain of command. Another frequently quoted verse is 1 Corinthians 14:40, “But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.” This order (taxis) is seen not only as a practical recommendation, but as a reflection of the character of God, who is not a God of chaos (1 Corinthians 14:33), so that an orderly and predictable structure is considered to better reflect the divine nature (Olajide, 2025).

In addition, hierarchical structures are often seen as the fulfillment and Christianization of the “Moses leadership” pattern in the Old Testament (Family 18). Jethro advised Moses to appoint leaders over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens to lighten his load and lead the people. This pattern, which is later seen in the appointment of elders in cities (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5), is considered to form the biblical basis for a scaled pyramid of authority (Olajide, 2025; Sutrisno et al., 2025).

### **Theological and Sociological Criticism of the Hierarchical Model**

Despite its claimed strong foundation, the hierarchical model faces sharp criticism, both from within and outside the tradition. This criticism can be grouped into three levels:

First, Exegetical Criticism (Interpretation): Many theologians argue that the hierarchical interpretation of the “Head and Body” metaphor has ignored linguistic and cultural nuances. In the context of the New Testament, “head” (kephalē) emphasizes source, origin, and sustainer of life, not merely ‘leader’ or “commander” (Lontoh, 2025). Thus, Christ's authority is more about giving life and guiding from within, not controlling from above. The emphasis on order in 1 Corinthians 14 is also often criticized because it is taken out of the charismatic and participatory context of the chapter itself, which actually encourages everyone to contribute their gifts (Borong, 2019).

Second, Practical Criticism: The harshest criticism highlights the gap between ideals and reality. Lontoh & Wibowo (2025) show that hierarchical structures often “ignore Jesus' teaching in Luke 22:24-30 to lead in a different way from other nations” (Lontoh & Wibowo, 2025). Instead of being servants, hierarchical leaders often fall into the accumulation of power, church politics, and even abuse of authority. The clergy-laity dichotomy reinforced by hierarchy is accused of “killing the gifts of the Spirit” (1

Corinthians 12:7) given to the whole congregation, creating a culture of dependence and passivity (Gibbs, 2005; Siagian et al., 2021).

Third, Contextual Criticism: In a postmodern world that is suspicious of centralized power and craves authentic participation, the hierarchical model is considered increasingly irrelevant and ineffective. Its slow structure is seen as less capable of responding quickly to local changes and hindering grassroots innovation. Lontoh & Wibowo (2025) categorize the challenges facing the church today as adaptive challenges, as exemplified by Jesus Himself in His leadership, something that is difficult to achieve in a rigid command-and-control system (Lontoh & Wibowo, 2025).

### **Apologetic Responses and Contemporary Reinterpretations**

Faced with this wave of criticism, thinkers who still uphold hierarchical values did not remain silent. They offered reinterpretations and updates to the traditional model.

First, Hierarchy as Diakonia: Contemporary defenses attempt to deconstruct the image of hierarchy as power over and reconstruct it as authority to serve (Biri, 2024). Positional authority is no longer seen as a privilege, but as a heavy responsibility to enable the whole body. A bishop or pastor in this view is a “servant of the servants,” whose ultimate authority lies precisely in his ability to humble himself and empower others (Guyette, 2011; Harefa, 2024; Saleem et al., 2020).

Second, Subsidiarity and Participatory Hierarchy: Some hierarchical traditions, such as Catholicism, have the principle of subsidiarity—that matters should be handled by the smallest, most local, or lowest competent authority. This principle can inject elements of participation and distribution of authority into pyramidal structures. In this model, hierarchy is not a barrier to participation, but a framework that regulates and directs meaningful and orderly participation (Mercadal, 2021; Nugraha Tjandraputra et al., 2023).

Third, Hierarchy for Unity in Diversity: Amid denominational fragmentation, hierarchy is claimed to be a tool for maintaining trans-local communality and accountability. It prevents the church from becoming a collection of isolated groups that only follow the charisma of local leaders, by maintaining relationships and responsibilities to the wider community (Gunawan, 2013; Mercadal, 2021).

Table 1: Tensions in the Interpretation of the Hierarchy's Basic Theology

<b>Theological Concept</b>	<b>Pro-Hierarchical Interpretation</b>	<b>Critical/Alternative Interpretation</b>
Christ as Head (Eph. 5:23)	Vertical sources of authority; models for the chain of command.	Source of life and growth; prioritizing organic relationships.
Order (1 Cor. 14:40)	Structural principles for pyramidal order and compliance.	The value that arises from polite participation in a charismatic community.
Elders (Acts 20:28)	Official positions with judicial and teaching authority.	The function of ministry (shepherd, teacher) among other functions in the body.
Moses' Leadership	Biblical patterns for delegation of authority in levels.	An ad hoc <i>example</i> for administrative matters, not a fixed pattern for the church.

This analysis shows that the hierarchical leadership model is a complex system. It cannot be simplified as merely a “rigid system.” It is supported by a coherent theological logic of order, unity, and preservation of faith rooted in a particular reading of Scripture (Mercadal, 2021). However, this model has proven to be highly susceptible to distortions of power, the dulling of congregational charisma, and contextual maladaptiveness. Contemporary apologetic responses attempt to address these weaknesses by emphasizing hierarchy as a form of service and by incorporating principles of participation (Wilson, 2022).

Thus, the critical question is no longer “hierarchical or not?”, but rather “what form of hierarchy—if any—is servant-oriented, empowering, and remains open to the dynamics of the Spirit working through the entire people of God?” This question bridges this analysis with an exploration of the polycentric model, as an alternative or perhaps a radical correction to the institutional tendencies inherent in the church throughout history. The encounter between these two models in contemporary church practice becomes a productive field of tension for discovering forms of leadership that are faithful and relevant (Guyette, 2011).

### **Analysis of the Polycentric Leadership Model:**

While the hierarchical model views the church through the lens of an institution that requires order, the polycentric leadership model understands the church as an organic movement and a living missional community (Handley, 2022). This paradigm does not merely propose a different structure, but builds a radical ecclesiology and pneumatology rooted like the Triune God and His redemptive purpose for His people.

### **Theological Foundation: From the Trinity to the “Universal Priesthood”**

The polycentric model's claim to New Testament fidelity rests on two inseparable theological pillars.

First, the Ontological Trinity paradigm. This model argues that the way the one God is present in three Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) who are equal, distinct, and exist in a perfect community of love, should be the blueprint for the communal life of His people (Braithwaite & Handley, 2022; Handley, 2021). Trinity leadership is intrinsically polycentric: the Father who sends, the Son who redeems, and the Spirit who sanctifies and empowers, working in unity of mission with multiple centers of agency. Thus, church leadership that emulates this divine pattern will reject the concentration of power in a single center and replace it with a collaborative, complementary network of influence (Handley Jr., 2025; Leithart, 2016). This is not merely an organizational strategy, but an effort to “become more like Christ, the Good Shepherd and Servant Leader” through a structure that reflects intra-Trinitarian relationships (Handley Jr, 2025).

Second, the actualization of the ecclesiology of the Body of Christ and the “Universal Priesthood.” This Trinitarian foundation finds its practical expression in the image of the church as “one body with many members” (Romans 12:4-5; Braithwaite & Handley, 2022). In a healthy body, each member functions according to their gift (charismata) for the good of the whole body (1 Corinthians 12:7). The polycentric model views the list of gifts of ministry in Ephesians 4:11-12—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—not as a hierarchical order of office, but as distributed leadership functions aimed at “equipping the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12; Handley, 2021). This is the concrete actualization of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, in which every believer is called and empowered for ministry, so that the functional dichotomy between clergy and laity becomes blurred. As Roxburgh & Romanuk (2006) emphasize, the role of leaders in this paradigm shifts from controller to

facilitator and empowerer who unleashes the potential of the entire congregation into mission (Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006).

### **Claims of Effectiveness: Networks, Participation, and Discernment.**

This model claims superiority in encouraging transformative participation through unique structural and cultural mechanisms.

First, responsiveness and innovation through dynamic networks. By empowering multiple centers of influence, the polycentric model is designed to respond to local needs more quickly and accurately (Handley, 2022). Each “center” or team in the network has the freedom to be self-governing and entrepreneurial, allowing it to experiment and innovate without being hampered by slow, pyramidal bureaucracy (Braithwaite & Handley, 2022; Handley, 2021). This structure is considered highly suitable for a networked and complex world, where the church must function as a complex, adaptive, and self-regulating system.

Second, deep participation and a sense of belonging. When authority is distributed based on gifts and calling, congregational participation shifts from performing tasks to living out their calling. This fosters a strong sense of belonging, as each member sees themselves not as “workers” but as “co-workers” with God in their field of service. The bond that is formed is no longer merely vertical loyalty to leaders, but horizontal commitment to a shared vision and community (Grimes & Bennett III, 2017).

Third, collective discernment as the core of spiritual leadership. The deepest claim of this model is its ability to accommodate the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit working through the community. This is where the practice of collective discernment proposed by Barton (2012) becomes crucial. Barton distinguishes between a team that gathers to complete a task and a spiritual community that gathers “around the Person—the person of Christ present through the Holy Spirit.” In a polycentric community, decision-making is not merely an administrative process, but a spiritual exercise to “discern and do the will of God” together (Romans 12:2). This process, which requires deep prayer, reflection, and dialogue, is believed to produce decisions that are more in tune with the leadership of Christ, the true Head of the church (Barton, 2012).

## **Implementation Challenges and Prerequisites for Success**

However, the transition to a polycentric model is not an easy path and faces significant challenges that are often underestimated by its supporters.

The first major challenge is the temptation to revert to old patterns. Maintaining commitment to spiritual community at the leadership level is hard work. As Barton acknowledges, the pressures of mission and the demands of ministry often threaten life together as a community in Christ, prompting groups to make decisions too quickly without listening to the wisdom of the whole community (Barton, 2012). Without deliberate spiritual discipline, the collaborative model can easily degenerate into merely efficient “teamwork” that loses its soul (Barton, 2012).

The second challenge is the complexity of accountability and coordination. The question of how to ensure accountability in a system with many autonomous centers is valid (Handley, 2021). Without clarity, this model risks creating anarchy or fragmentation. To overcome this, a sophisticated polycentric governance system is needed, in which overlapping decision-making entities respect each other and consider the broader ecosystem (Handley, 2021). This requires a very high level of trust, communication, and a culture of mutual submission, which is difficult to build and maintain.

Prerequisites for the success of this model: 1) Spiritual maturity: both leaders and congregations need to mature in Christ's character, able to manage freedom with responsibility. 2) Culture of Trust and Transparency: A strong relational foundation is essential to prevent suspicion and power politics. 3) Clear Structure and Processes: Even though it's distributed, the accountability framework, communication channels, and decision-making processes (like shared discernment) need to be designed and followed together (Braithwaite & Handley, 2022; Franklin & Niemandt, 2016; Handley, 2021; Wilson, 2022).

Table 2. The most fundamental difference lies in the power structure and decision-making process.

<b>Aspects</b>	<b>Leadership Hierarchy</b>	<b>Polycentric Leadership</b>
Power Structure	Centralized and vertical	Distributed and networked

Aspects	Leadership Hierarchy	Polycentric Leadership
Decision Making	Top-down, from top to bottom	Bottom-up or collaborative between autonomous nodes
Flexibility	Rigid, bureaucratic, slow to adapt	Flexible, adaptive to local contexts
Communication	Formal through official channels	Lateral and multidirectional
Innovation	Often hampered by bureaucracy	More likely to emerge from different centres

### **Theological Reconciliation and Practical Challenges: Weaving Tension Toward an Empowering Synthesis**

The tension between hierarchical and polycentric models of leadership in the church is not merely a competition between organizational structures. It is a deep ecclesiological struggle—a dialectic between two equally valid poles of biblical truth. On the one hand, the Apostle Paul asserts that “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly manner” (1 Corinthians 14:40). Orderliness is not a worldly value; it reflects the character of God, who is not a God of chaos. On the other hand, Paul also teaches that “to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). No believer is gifted without a gift, and no gift is given without a participatory purpose. This is a tension that should not be avoided, but rather managed creatively and responsibly.

#### **1. Rejecting False Dichotomies: From “Either/Or” to “Both/And”**

The most common mistake in church leadership discourse is forcing a choice between two extreme poles. It is as if the church must choose: be faithful to order or be faithful to grace; preserve doctrinal purity or empower participation; respect legitimate authority or celebrate the freedom of the Spirit. This dichotomy is false because Scripture itself never pits the two against each other.

The Paul who wrote 1 Corinthians 14:40 is the same Paul who formulated the theology of the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. There is no internal contradiction in the apostle's thinking. What exists is a dialectical balance: order is not the opposite of

participation, but rather the condition that allows participation to occur in a meaningful and sustainable way. Conversely, participation without a framework of order will give rise to chaos that will actually kill the gift itself.

Therefore, an absolute dichotomy is unnecessary and unbiblical. As Handley (2022) suggests, the church is not faced with a choice between hierarchy or polycentricity, but with a call to design a contextual hybrid structure. In this model, the church can maintain clear structural accountability—with a clear chain of responsibility, doctrinal protection, and defined leadership—while actively and intentionally creating legitimate space and authority for autonomous ministry teams, which operate based on their gifts, calling, and local context (Handley, 2022).

A concrete example: A synod can maintain collegial authority in setting doctrine and ethical standards (a healthy hierarchical element), but at the same time give local churches or community mission networks complete freedom to design their own methods of ministry, outreach strategies, and resource allocation (a polycentric element). Here, hierarchy is not seen as a controller, but as an umbrella of accountability and a provider of legitimacy.

## **2. The Biggest Challenge: Shifting Mentalities, Not Structural Design**

The literature shows that failures in church leadership transformation are more often caused by cultural and spiritual factors than by weaknesses in organizational design. The biggest challenge is not “how to design a hybrid structure,” but “how to shift the mentality from a culture of compliance to a culture of empowerment” (Guyette, 2011).

The culture of compliance was born out of a hierarchical model that has existed for centuries. In this culture, the success of the congregation is measured by how obedient they are to the leader's instructions. Initiative is considered risky, questions are considered insubordination, and autonomy is seen as a threat to unity. As a result, the muscles of congregational participation atrophy. They are accustomed to receiving, not giving; accustomed to executing, not designing; accustomed to obeying, not taking responsibility.

An empowerment culture, on the other hand, is fertile ground for a polycentric model. In this culture, leaders see their primary task not as controlling, but as facilitating and unleashing potential. Success is measured by how many members of the

congregation discover and exercise their gifts. However, this shift does not happen overnight. It requires:

1. Systematic and continuous development. Congregations need to be trained, not just given freedom. Freedom without competence is chaos; competence without freedom is a prison.
2. Long-term patience. Culture does not change through decrees. It changes through consistent example, recognition of small successes, and forgiveness for failures in the learning process.
3. Leadership by example from the top. As long as top leaders continue to use a command-and-control style, formal decentralization will never take root. The shift in mentality must start at the top.

### **3. Double Crisis: Exhaustion at One Pole, Fragmentation at the Other**

The literature reveals that both models face their own intrinsic crises, not incidental ones.

The hierarchical model faces a crisis of legitimacy and a crisis of sustainability. The crisis of legitimacy arises from the gap between claims of sacred authority and the reality of leadership that often fails morally. When the top leader falls, the entire system loses face. The crisis of sustainability arises from central leader burnout.

In this model, the entire burden of vision, decision-making, and spiritual responsibility rests on one or two figures at the top of the pyramid. They become a single point of failure. When they tire, fall, or die, the church loses its direction. The polycentric model, on the other hand, faces a crisis of coordination and potential fragmentation.

With multiple autonomous centers of leadership, the question of accountability becomes complicated: who is responsible if a ministry network deviates from doctrine? Who bears the burden when conflicts arise between teams that cannot be resolved internally? Freedom without coordination breeds subtle chaos—everyone does what they think is right, and the community loses its visible unity.

This discussion argues that the polycentric model, despite its coordination challenges, offers a better response to the crisis of pastoral burnout. By distributing the burden of ministry and leadership, the pressure is no longer concentrated on one or two charismatic figures. Leadership becomes a collective function, not an individual position. This is not just a matter of organizational efficiency, but of faithfulness to the ecclesiology

of the Body of Christ: that the Spirit never intended to heap gifts on a select few, but to distribute them to all members to complement one another.

However, this success is not automatic. Distributing the burden without distributing maturity is a disaster. The polycentric model only works if it is accompanied by three critical prerequisites:

1. **Collective spiritual discipline.** A distributed leadership network cannot survive on meeting structures and reports alone. It requires practices of communal prayer, communal Scripture reading, and collective discernment at the heart of every decision (Barton, 2012). Without these, polycentrism is merely administrative decentralization that has lost its soul.
2. **A strong peer support system.** Leaders in polycentric networks are no less vulnerable than hierarchical leaders; it's just that their vulnerability is different. They face the pressures of isolation and exhaustion because they don't have a "boss" who makes the final decisions. Therefore, a community of leaders—who pray for, correct, and strengthen one another—is not merely a supplement, but an essential spiritual infrastructure.
3. **Healthy and transparent accountability mechanisms.** Autonomy without accountability is a license for deviation. A polycentric model requires a mutual submission ethos that is lived out, not merely declared. This means that each leadership center must be willing to be evaluated, corrected, and even rebuked by other centers in the same network, with a spirit of love and humility (Handley, 2021).

#### **4. Theological Reconciliation: Toward a Holistic Ecclesiology**

At its deepest level, the reconciliation between hierarchical and polycentric models is not merely an organizational compromise. It is a theological reconciliation between two equally valid emphases of ecclesiology.

Institutional ecclesiology reminds us that the church is the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Timothy 3:15). It has a historical responsibility to preserve the depositum fidei from generation to generation. Without an orderly structure, there is no continuity; without continuity, there is no fidelity to the apostolic mandate.

Charismatic-communal ecclesiology reminds us that the church is the living Body of Christ, whose members are gifted to serve one another. Without recognition of scattered gifts, there is no growth; without growth, the body becomes paralyzed.

These two ecclesiologies need not be opposed. A healthy church is one that has both a backbone and flexible muscles. The backbone is the structure that gives form, direction, and protection. The flexible muscles are the dynamic participation of all members moving in mission. Bones without muscles are a dead skeleton; muscles without bones are a shapeless mass.

This theological reconciliation leads to the recognition that Christ himself is the only true Head of the church. Both hierarchical structures and polycentric networks are merely instruments—both of which stand under the absolute authority of the Word and the guidance of the Spirit. When hierarchy becomes tyrannical, it must be criticized by prophetic voices. When the polycentric becomes chaotic, it must be called back to liberating order. No single model is free from sin and distortion. However, both can be purified and used by God to build His people.

### **A Critical Warning from the Global South: Stability is Not the Monopoly of Hierarchy**

One of the most deeply rooted—and least frequently tested—assumptions in ecclesiastical leadership discourse is the belief that stability and continuity can only be guaranteed by a centralized hierarchical structure. This assumption, often presented as the most reasonable defense of hierarchy, proves invalid when tested in the context of Global South churches.

Palma's (2022) historical-comparative study of Brazilian and American Pentecostalism provides a strong empirical refutation. He shows that the emergence of Latin American Pentecostalism in the early 20th century, particularly in Brazil, was defined precisely by its grassroots character. In stark contrast to the “top-down hierarchical structure typical of old fashions of Western Christendom,” the birth of Brazilian Pentecostalism actually embodied “stability from the bottom up”—in the midst of and by ordinary people.

More importantly, Palma documents how large denominations such as the Christian Congregation in Brazil consciously maintain their grassroots identity despite having grown massively into national churches with millions of members. They reject excessive bureaucratization and remain faithful to the logic of distributed leadership that

has been in their movement's DNA since the beginning. This is not a failure to achieve “organizational maturity”; it is a conscious theological and ecclesiological choice.

Palma's findings have profound theological implications for attempts at reconciliation between hierarchical and polycentric models. He demonstrates that:

*First*, stability is not the monopoly of hierarchical structures. Decentralized churches, even those that grow into giant denominations, can maintain coherence and sustainability without adopting the vertical chains of command typical of Western bureaucracies.

*Second*, the dichotomy between “order” (1 Cor. 14:40) and “charismatic freedom” (1 Cor. 12) is a Western theological construct that is not always relevant in contexts where stability arises from grassroots participation. Paul never contrasted the two; likewise, churches in the Global South do not need to choose exclusively between them.

*Third*, the longing for “order” in hierarchical discourse is often a projection of Western cultural needs, not a universal biblical imperative. That churches in Brazil can grow, survive, and even export missionaries around the world with a highly decentralized leadership model is clear evidence that the Holy Spirit is not bound to the organizational preferences of Constantinian Christianity.

Thus, true theological reconciliation is not enough to simply embrace hybrid models within a Western conceptual framework. It requires epistemological repentance: the recognition that churches in the Global South have long lived in a reality that the West has only now “discovered” as a new paradigm. It is not the West that is teaching polycentrism to the Global South; on the contrary, the witness of grassroots churches in Africa, Latin America, and Asia—which have long been marginalized from the production of global theological knowledge—is a silent witness that challenges us to imagine a richer and more nuanced ecclesiology.

### ***5. Practical Implications for Contemporary Church Leaders***

From this synthesis, at least five practical implications can be drawn for church leaders who are struggling with leadership design:

1. Conduct regular ecclesiological audits. Does the current church structure empower or shackle the congregation? Are central leaders experiencing chronic fatigue? Do ministry teams feel they have sufficient autonomy or are they constrained? Honest evaluation is the beginning of structural repentance.

2. Start small, not with a major revolution. The church does not need to completely dismantle the existing system. It is enough to start by giving legitimate autonomy to one or two ministry teams. Let them design programs, manage budgets, and take responsibility for the results. From these small successes, trust and learning will grow.
3. Invest heavily in leadership development. The polycentric model only works if there are many mature leaders. The church must deliberately identify, train, and empower new leaders from various age groups and backgrounds.
4. Build a rhythm of discernment together. Don't let leadership meetings be filled only with reports and technical discussions. Set aside special time for prayer, Scripture reading, and discernment together before making strategic decisions. This is not an add-on, but the core of spiritual leadership.
5. Celebrate contributions, not just positions. In a culture of empowerment, recognition is given to those who faithfully use their gifts, not just to those who hold structural positions. Public recognition of the contributions of the ministry team, no matter how small, is fertilizer for congregational participation.

### ***6. Conclusion: An Endless Dialectic***

The reconciliation between hierarchical and polycentric leadership is not an end point, but rather an ongoing process. A living church will always move in a creative tension between order and freedom, between authority and participation, between institution and movement. As long as we are still on our journey to the New Jerusalem, this dialectic will never be resolved.

However, we need not fear this tension. The Holy Spirit is never absent from the struggles of His church. He who wrote the law on stone tablets is also the one who breathed life into dry bones. He who built the magnificent Temple is also the one who tore down the dividing curtain. He who appointed overseers is also the one who pours out gifts on every believer.

**Our calling is not to choose one model and discard the other. Our calling is to faithfully listen to the voice of the Head, in the midst of tension, with humility and hope.**

### **Impact on Congregational Participation**

The most significant difference between the two models lies in their impact on marginalized voices within the church ecosystem. The polycentric model, with its logic of distribution and recognition based on gifts, intrinsically opens space for groups that have been on the margins of hierarchical structures—women, youth, laypeople without formal positions—to be recognized, empowered, and given authority within their sphere of ministry (Wilson, 2022). In contrast, hierarchical models that tie authority to position tend to reproduce established patterns of exclusion, even if they are not explicitly discriminatory.

Franklin and Niemandt (2016) add that in the context of mission, the polycentric capacity to utilize the collective intelligence of the entire network makes it more resilient in the face of rapid contextual change. However, it is important to note that opening up space for participation does not automatically mean creating participatory justice. Without conscious deconstruction of deep-rooted cultural and structural biases, the polycentric model merely shifts the locus of power without fundamentally changing its distribution. This is where the critical contribution of the prophetic model—which unfortunately is beyond the scope of this study—becomes relevant in reminding us that true participation is always the fruit of structural conversion, not merely technical reorganization (Tisdale, 2010). A comprehensive comparison of all dimensions of congregational participation is summarized in Table 3.

### **Implications for the Church's Mission in a Complex World**

Hierarchical and polycentric leadership styles have very different effects on congregational participation. Essentially, hierarchical models tend to direct and limit participation within structured channels, while polycentric models aim to distribute and multiply participation throughout the network .

Table 3. Comparison of Impacts on Congregational Participation

Aspects of Participation	Leadership Hierarchy (Centralized)	Polycentric Leadership (Distributed)
Properties & Quality	Structured & Directed. Participation often follows	Organic & Initiative. Participation emerged from various "centers"

Aspects of Participation	Leadership Hierarchy (Centralized)	Polycentric Leadership (Distributed)
	procedures and roles that have been established from above. The congregation participates in a framework that has been designed by the leader.	within the network, encouraging local initiatives and creations based on gifts and contexts.
Decision Making	Limited and Top-Down. The process usually involves senior leaders or boards. Lay congregation input is often minimal, except through limited formal channels.	Collaborative and Networking. Decisions are made through consultation and dialogue among many leaders and network members, making room for a wide range of voices to be heard.
Service & Mission	Coordinated by the Center. Programs and missions are typically designed and assigned by a central leadership structure. The congregation participates as the executor of the vision that has been set.	Generated Network. Services emerged from different groups within the network, allowing for a quick and contextual response. Everyone can be an initiator and contributor to the mission.
Accountability & Relationships	Vertical. Accountability mainly flows upwards in the chain of command. The relationship between the congregation and the leader is often formal and authority-based.	Reciprocal (Mutual). Accountability is horizontal and multi-directional in the spirit of subjugating and "bearing one another's burdens".
Potential Results	Stability and Uniformity. Can achieve high efficiency and coordination, as well as maintain doctrinal purity.	Innovation and Resilience. Spark deeper creativity and engagement, building collective resilience as leadership and resources are distributed.
Risks & Challenges	Dependency and Passivity. It can create a paternalistic culture, where the congregation becomes passive and the central leader is overloaded. The potential for abuse of power is higher.	Complexity and Potential for Fragmentation. Requires intensive communication and high spiritual maturity. Without a strong shared vision, it can lead to confusion or fragmented work.

## **CONCLUSION**

This comparative study confirms that the debate between hierarchical and polycentric leadership models in the church cannot be resolved by a dichotomous simplification that glorifies one model and rejects the other. Both leadership paradigms have coherent theological foundations, distinctive operational characteristics, and different ecclesiological consequences for congregational participation.

A crucial finding of this research is that there is no “one size fits all” model. The choice of church leadership structure must be contextual, taking into account historical factors, denominational culture, the maturity level of the congregation, and the mission challenges faced. The most promising direction is not a total migration from one model to another, but rather a contextual hybrid design—adopting the principles of gift distribution and empowerment from the polycentric model without neglecting the clarity of accountability and coordination of the hierarchical structure.

More fundamentally, this research underscores that the real battle lies not in structural design alone, but in a deeper theological struggle over the nature of the church and a model of leadership that emulates Christ.

Jesus' leadership itself reverses the logic of worldly power: true authority is not obtained through position or control, but through an intimate relationship with the Father and the embodiment of love in acts of self-sacrificing service. Christ-like leadership, whether exercised in a more hierarchical or more polycentric structure, must always be directed toward radiating Christ's presence and realizing God's mission in every sphere of life.

Thus, further research is needed not only to explore the implementation of hybrid models in various denominational and cultural settings, but also to continue to grapple with how church leadership structures can become channels that enable all of God's people to live as the whole, active Body of Christ, faithful to its missional calling in the midst of a complex world.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In practice, many churches are not entirely hierarchical or polycentric, but fall somewhere on a spectrum. The main consideration is that the advantages of hierarchical models (speed, clarity) often come at the expense of accountability and participation, while the advantages of polycentric models (collective wisdom, resilience) often come at

the expense of efficiency and speed. Churches can evaluate and adjust their leadership models using the following principles:

**Build Healthy Accountability:** Even in more centralized structures, forming an independent board of overseers that is bold and able to question top leaders is critical.

**Increase Meaningful Participation:** Find ways to incorporate the voices, gifts, and wisdom of the lay congregation into the decision-making process, whether through teams, consultations, or councils.

**Prioritize Character and Followership:** The primary criteria for leaders should be Christ-like maturity of character and the ability to submit and work in teams, not just competence.

**Hold Fast to a Shared Vision:** Whether in a hierarchical or polycentric model, unity depends on a shared commitment to the vision, mission, and authority of God's Word that transcends all structures.

### **Limitations and Future Research Agenda**

This literature review has limitations, primarily because it relies on existing reports and theoretical analyses. Longitudinal empirical studies measuring the impact of both models on congregational spiritual growth, youth retention rates, and mission effectiveness are still greatly needed.

The future research agenda also needs to address: how to design a healthy transition from a hierarchical model to a more distributed model, and how to evaluate the health of a polycentric leadership ecosystem. Exploration of leadership models in non-Western churches will also enrich this discourse.

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