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Rethinking Intercultural Leadership in Catholic Churches in Nigeria: Issues and Prospects

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Abstract
This paper addresses the critical need for intercultural leadership within the Catholic Church in Nigeria, where ethnic groups with distinct cultural values coexist. The challenges of managing a multi-ethnic congregation are profound, with intercultural leadership becoming crucial in fostering unity. The research gap lies in the lack of specific strategies for navigating Nigeria's complex cultural landscape, especially in religious leadership. The objectives of this paper are to explore the concept of intercultural leadership, identify the roles of Catholic Church leaders in promoting interculturality in Nigeria, and offer recommendations for effective practices to bridge cultural divides. The paper employed secondary sources, it further examines the role of the Catholic Church in promoting social cohesion amidst ethnic diversity and how its leadership can facilitate unity in Nigeria's fragmented social fabric. Findings indicate that Church leaders struggle to adapt their leadership models to Nigeria's evolving cultural dynamics, particularly in urban areas with increasing ethnic pluralism. The paper opines that Catholic leaders focus on developing intercultural competency, encourage interfaith dialogue, and foster inclusive leadership models. This paper emphasizes the importance of adapting liturgical practices and leadership structures to reflect the diverse cultural composition of the Church's followers.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Interculturality, Leaders, and Leadership

Introduction

Intercultural leadership in religious institutions is more than just a concept; it is the heartbeat of effective ministry in today's world (Hah, 2019), especially within a culturally diverse society like Nigeria. In a nation where ethnic and cultural identities define much of the social fabric, the Catholic Church's role in promoting unity amidst this diversity is paramount. The challenge faced by the Church in Nigeria as revealed by Onuorah (2024) and Afolabi and Afolabi (2024) is not merely one of managing administrative structures but rather one of embodying a leadership style that is inclusive, empathetic, and adaptive to the changing cultural dynamics of the location of the church. Intercultural leadership, in this context, offers a pathway for religious leaders to engage with diverse communities, fostering an environment where differences are not only respected but also embraced as strengths (Jamil and Firmansyah, 2025).

The importance of intercultural leadership in the Catholic Church cannot be overstated, particularly in Nigeria, which is home to over 450 ethnic groups. These groups bring with them distinct languages, traditions, and worldviews. This rich diversity, while a source of cultural wealth (Oluwadele et al, 2023) also poses challenges in terms of social cohesion and religious unity. The Catholic Church, with its mission of love, peace, and unity, stands as a central institution in Nigeria's religious and social landscape. Its influence extends beyond spiritual guidance to shaping the ethical and social values of its followers. However, to maintain its relevance and effectiveness in Nigeria's dynamic and multi-ethnic society, the Church must rethink its leadership approaches.

The research employed secondary source research methodology to demonstrate that, intercultural leadership is more than just understanding cultural differences; it is about creating spaces where these differences can be integrated into a collective vision (Cherkowski, S., & Ragoonaden, 2016; Moss et al, 2017). Leadership in the Catholic Church, particularly in Nigeria, requires leaders who are not only aware of cultural nuances but who can also navigate the complexities of intra-church relations across different cultural contexts. The ability to manage these cultural dynamics sensitively and effectively is a hallmark of intercultural leadership. Leadership in such an environment must focus on promoting inclusivity, mutual respect, and collaborative engagement (Kuknor and Bhattacharya 2022), which are essential for fostering harmony within the Church's diverse congregation.

However, the Nigerian Catholic Church faces significant challenges in addressing intercultural leadership. One of the most prominent issues is the tendency for leadership styles to be rooted in traditional cultural norms that may not always align with the universal call for inclusivity within the Church (Palapessy and Tanihatu, 2024). In some regions, religious leaders may unknowingly perpetuate practices that favor certain ethnic or cultural groups over others. This favoritism in most cases do lead to divisions within the congregation, creating an environment where some members feel marginalized. For example, liturgical practices, language use in Mass, and leadership appointments can reflect the cultural biases of those in positions of power, inadvertently alienating minority groups within the Church.

Furthermore, the vast diversity within Nigeria, encompassing not just ethnic diversity but also varying religious practices and beliefs, poses an ongoing challenge for the Catholic Church. While the Church preaches unity, the reality is that cultural differences can create barriers to true collaboration and understanding (Lifintsev and Canhavilhas, 2017). Effective intercultural leadership in the Catholic Church therefore requires leaders to transcend these barriers, making room for different voices, and ensuring that no culture is left behind in the pursuit of religious and social goals. The failure to do so will not only weaken the Church's internal unity but also impede its ability to fulfill its mission in the broader Nigerian society.

Intercultural leadership in the Catholic Church is particularly relevant as the country grapples with increasing cultural pluralism. Nigeria's diverse population calls for a leadership model that is not monolithic but rather multifaceted, one that can accommodate diverse perspectives while remaining true to the universal values of the Church. As Nigeria's population continues to grow, and as migration patterns shift both internally and externally, the Church must be prepared to adapt its leadership strategies to include people from all walks of life. The growing number of

young people in urban areas, many of whom are from diverse ethnic backgrounds, demands a leadership approach that is not only traditional but also forward-thinking and inclusive.

Conceptual Review

Leadership

Leadership, a concept that has been pivotal in social sciences, business, and organizational theory, has evolved considerably over time. Various scholars have contributed to its development, offering perspectives that organizational, cultural, and contextual shifts. Early definitions of leadership primarily emphasized hierarchical, directive roles. Scholars such Hunt and Fedynich (2019) present leadership as a process wherein an individual influences a group to achieve common goals. These views largely align with a Western-centric notion of leadership, where a single, often authoritative figure guides the group. This view was consistent with the leadership styles prevalent in more rigidly structured organizations, where command and control were emphasized.

However, this perspective was criticized for its limited applicability in diverse and dynamic organizational contexts. Cleveland and Cleveland (2020) and de Jongh and Ntakumba (2019) and argue that leadership is a more dynamic, relational, and culturally sensitive process. Theories such as transformational leadership, proposed by Bass and Avolio (1993), and servant leadership, as described by Greenleaf (1970), move away from the top-down model and emphasize shared leadership. Transformational leadership, for example, calls for leaders to inspire and motivate followers to transcend self-interest for the greater good, aligning with the concept of interculturality in its recognition that leadership involves a connection and understanding of cultural differences (Northouse, 2018). This broader interpretation suggests that effective leadership transcends simple task delegation, involving a deeper engagement with individuals' values, beliefs, and cultural contexts.

In the early works of scholars like Weber as cited by Glassman (2025), leadership was often tied to authority types, such as traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational forms. These models defined leaders as individuals who could establish control and maintain social order. While these models were relevant at the time, they did not fully address the complexities of leadership in culturally diverse settings. Modern interpretations of leadership, particularly those influenced by globalized organizational structures, increasingly emphasize intercultural competence. For instance, the work of Deng and Gibson (2008) focuses on the importance of cross-cultural leadership, which integrates intercultural communication and the ability to navigate cultural differences effectively. To this extent, leadership becomes not just about influence but about adapting one’s style to different cultural environments, suggesting that leaders must be flexible and culturally aware.

Furthermore, in the realm of intercultural leadership, Bissessar (2018) and Vonk and Silva (2024) have contributed significantly to understanding how cultural dimensions influence leadership effectiveness. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory according to Żemojtel-Piotrowska and Piotrowski (2023) identifies several key cultural values, such as power distance and individualism versus collectivism, that shape how leadership is enacted in different cultural settings. Leaders operating in cultures with high power distance may adopt more authoritative styles, whereas those in low power distance cultures may embrace more democratic and participative approaches. One key distinction between conservative and modern scholars’

approaches is the understanding of leadership as a transactional versus transformational process. Conservative scholars, influenced by classical theories, emphasize the transactional nature of leadership; where leaders maintain order and manage resources. Modern theories, however, move toward a more relational and fluid understanding, where leaders are seen as motivators, collaborators, and adaptors within intercultural contexts. These perspectives allow for a more inclusive definition of leadership, acknowledging the influence of diversity, culture, and mutual respect.

Interculturality

Interculturality is a multifaceted concept that continues to evolve in academic discourse, particularly in the context of leadership. This according to Dai and Chen (2015) refers to the dynamic interaction between different cultures, where mutual understanding, respect, and negotiation are key to fostering positive relationships. One of the most influential views on interculturality is provided by Gonzales (2017), who describes it as the ability to interact effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This concept, while centered on communication skills, highlights how intercultural competence is essential for leaders navigating diverse environments. From a leadership perspective, Gonzales's definition emphasizes that leaders must not only understand cultural differences but also navigate them diplomatically to ensure collaboration and inclusivity. This dimension of interculturality fosters a leadership style that is inclusive, adaptive, and communicative, qualities that are indispensable for managing multicultural teams.

Similarly, interculturality is discussed by Janík (2017), who conceptualizes it as the process of exchange and negotiation between different cultural groups, emphasizing that the value of intercultural communication lies in the shared knowledge and mutual learning that emerges from such interactions. This view suggests that leadership in intercultural contexts requires leaders to facilitate spaces where diverse perspectives are not just acknowledged but actively integrated into decision-making processes. This notion positions leadership as a bridge-builder, ensuring that intercultural differences do not lead to division but rather to collective growth and understanding.

Arghode et al (2023) approaches interculturality from the perspective of emotional intelligence, highlighting the need for leaders to cultivate empathy and self-awareness when engaging with people from different cultural backgrounds. They argue that leaders who possess intercultural competence can better navigate cross-cultural interactions by demonstrating sensitivity to diverse emotional cues, fostering an environment of trust and respect. Arghode et al (2023) definition is particularly valuable for leadership contexts as it emphasizes that intercultural leaders must balance cognitive understanding with emotional responsiveness to effectively guide diverse teams. In a more organizational context, interculturality is framed as a critical factor for successful leadership in globalized environments. Hofstede's work on cultural dimensions theory demonstrates how differences in values, norms, and behaviors shape leadership effectiveness across cultures. Leaders who understand these cultural dimensions can better manage conflicts, communicate expectations, and align diverse teams towards common goals. This conceptualization underscores the importance of intercultural competence in shaping leadership practices that are both globally informed and locally relevant.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

The social identity theory was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the early 80s. the theory provides a valuable lens for understanding group dynamics and inter-group relations. The theory posits that individuals define themselves based on their membership in various social groups, such as those defined by ethnicity, religion, or nationality. This identification with in-groups; those groups with which one identifies, fuels a sense of belonging, while simultaneously creating boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, groups to which an individual does not belong (Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019). The categorization process is not only an individual psychological mechanism but also a powerful force shaping social interactions and inter-group behavior.

The emotional aspect of social identity plays a significant role in shaping how people perceive and respond to others. Group members often feel a sense of pride and esteem when their in-group is valued or successful, while out-groups are sometimes perceived negatively (McGowan, 2017). These perceptions can drive conflict, but they also provide opportunities for cooperation, depending on how group identities are managed. In multicultural environments ethnic and cultural identities can become sources of tension or strength. Leaders within the Church, recognizing the psychological importance of these identities, must foster an inclusive environment where individuals see themselves as part of a shared religious identity, transcending their ethnic and cultural differences.

When Catholic leaders embrace practices that promote inclusivity, they can diminish inter-group conflicts and encourage collaboration across cultural divides. Social identity theory highlights that by focusing on common religious values and shared experiences, leaders can help congregants from diverse ethnic backgrounds identify more strongly with the broader Church community (Amamnsunu, 2024). Thus, the theory provides a valuable framework for addressing the challenges leaders face in managing diverse congregations and promoting unity within the Church.

The Role of the Catholic Church in Promoting National Unity through Cultural Leadership

The Catholic Church in Nigeria plays a pivotal role in promoting national unity through its intercultural leadership initiatives. As a religious institution that spans across diverse ethnic and cultural groups, the Church provides a unique platform for fostering social cohesion and integration (Pascal, 2019). Nigeria, with its rich cultural mosaic and varied religious affiliations, has long struggled with ethnic divisions, conflicts, and tensions. To this extent, the Church's leadership serves as a stabilizing force, working towards peace-building and reconciliation.

One of the most significant ways the Catholic Church contributes to national unity is through its inclusive and culturally sensitive leadership. Catholicism in Nigeria is not confined to a singular ethnic or cultural group; rather, it unites people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds under a shared faith (Ele, 2019). Church leaders, particularly at the parish level, are tasked with guiding a multi-ethnic congregation, which requires the ability to navigate complex cultural dynamics. They do this by encouraging mutual respect, understanding, and dialogue among diverse groups, ensuring that everyone feels valued within the Church community. The emphasis on community-building and the shared values of love, peace, and forgiveness underscores the

Church's commitment to fostering a sense of belonging among its followers, regardless of their cultural origins.

Furthermore, the Church's role according to Rugyendo (2025) extends beyond the pulpit into social activism, where it actively participates in peace-building efforts. Through its various outreach programs, the Church addresses issues such as poverty, injustice, and human rights violations, all of which are often sources of conflict among different groups. These initiatives are designed to mitigate ethnic tensions by promoting equitable development and access to resources across cultural divides. The Church's involvement in humanitarian activities, such as providing education, healthcare, and disaster relief, enhances its reputation as an institution that transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries in its mission to serve the common good.

The Church's intercultural leadership is also evident in its efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance. Nigeria is home to a diverse array of religious groups, with Christianity and Islam being the two major faiths. To this extent, religious intolerance can worsen cultural and ethnic divisions. The Catholic Church, through its leadership, has consistently called for peaceful coexistence and respect between different religious groups (Thumi, 2023). Initiatives such as interfaith dialogue forums and ecumenical gatherings allow the Church to lead by example in fostering understanding and respect across religious lines. These efforts help to diminish prejudices, break down stereotypes, and create an environment where people can appreciate the diversity that exists within their society.

The Catholic Church in Nigeria also plays a role in political advocacy, promoting policies that advance peace, stability, and national unity. Church leaders often speak out on issues of governance, social justice, and human rights, urging the government to adopt policies that promote inclusivity and equal opportunities for all citizens (Krull, 2020). The Church's influence in these areas provides a moral compass, guiding national discourse towards unity and collective responsibility. The ability of the Church to mobilize communities, advocate for social justice, and mediate in times of conflict positions it as a key player in Nigeria's quest for national unity.

In a multicultural society such as Nigeria, the Catholic Church's leadership initiatives hold significant potential for promoting tolerance, respect, and understanding. Through its active engagement in social, cultural, and interfaith dialogues, the Church can continue to be a beacon of hope for a united Nigeria. The future prospects for the Church to lead the way in promoting national unity are bright, as its leadership continues to demonstrate a commitment to peace and social cohesion, transcending the cultural and ethnic divisions that often characterize Nigerian society

The Role of Catholic Church Leaders as Mediators in Intercultural Conflicts

Catholic Church leaders hold a critical role as mediators in resolving intercultural conflicts within the church community, particularly as cultural tensions often arise from ethnic disputes or misunderstandings related to worship practices. These leaders, as spiritual figures, are uniquely positioned to serve as neutral figures, facilitating dialogue and reconciliation between different cultural groups within the church (Afolabi, 2019). Their authority and influence enable them to create an environment conducive to peace-building and healing, drawing upon their pastoral responsibilities to guide individuals toward mutual understanding and respect.

In a multicultural church, cultural differences can manifest in various forms, from the language used in liturgies to differing traditions of worship, and even the interpretation of religious teachings (Kim, 2017). Such differences can create tensions, especially when cultural groups feel their practices are not acknowledged or respected by others. Church leaders, through their mediating role, can ensure that all cultural expressions within the church are validated while fostering a sense of unity and common purpose. Their leadership is instrumental in guiding the community to embrace diversity as a source of strength rather than division.

Effective Catholic leaders act as impartial facilitators who create safe spaces for open dialogue, allowing conflicting groups to voice their concerns while ensuring that all parties are heard (Madden, 2020). These leaders leverage their deep understanding of Christian teachings, emphasizing values such as forgiveness, reconciliation, and love for one's neighbor. For instance, Pope Francis has advocated for intercultural dialogue within the church, promoting the idea of a "universal fraternity" that transcends cultural boundaries (World Mission Magazine, 2025). This philosophy underpins the work of Catholic leaders at the local level, who are often called upon to mediate disputes involving ethnic groups, with a focus on reconciliation and peace-building.

In Nigeria, Catholic bishops have stepped in to mediate conflicts between different cultural groups, advocating for peace and unity within the church. One such example is the role of the Catholic Church in the Jos crisis, a long-running ethnic and religious conflict in Plateau State. Here, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) played an instrumental role by creating the Plateau Peace Initiative, which brought together leaders from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to foster dialogue and understanding (Abossey, 2022). The bishops facilitated open conversations about the grievances between the groups, providing a neutral space for healing and promoting peace. This initiative helped prevent the escalation of violence in the region, demonstrating the Church's ability to use its moral authority and leadership to foster unity amidst ethnic divisions. The Church's leadership in addressing both ethnic conflicts and the integration of immigrant communities highlights its vital role in promoting social cohesion and unity, reinforcing its position as a neutral mediator capable of addressing complex cultural challenges.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church's role in promoting intercultural leadership within Nigeria presents a compelling framework for fostering national unity. By embracing inclusive leadership, Church leaders can navigate the diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious landscape of Nigeria, ensuring that the Church remains a unifying force. However, the ongoing challenges of cultural biases, traditional practices, and fragmented leadership practices continue to hinder the Church's potential in achieving full inclusivity. This study highlights the necessity for Church leaders to adopt leadership models that are flexible, culturally aware, and focused on building unity among the congregation.

The paper has revealed that Catholic Church leaders should focus on intercultural competency development, ensuring they understand the cultural nuances that influence the behavior and interactions of different groups. Additionally, promoting interfaith dialogue and establishing collaborative platforms where diverse groups can share experiences and perspectives will be crucial in addressing misunderstandings and conflicts. Church leaders should also lead by example, fostering a leadership style that emphasizes empathy, mutual respect, and inclusivity.

Finally, efforts should be made to ensure that leadership structures and liturgical practices reflect the diversity of the congregation, moving away from ethnocentric practices that could alienate minority groups. Such steps will not only strengthen the Church's internal unity but also empower it to continue playing a vital role in Nigeria's social and cultural cohesion.

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