Ecclesial Leadership and Social Responsibility within the African Context of Economic Injustice

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Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of ecclesial leadership and its relationship with social responsibility within the Sub-Saharan African context where many nations are experiencing economic injustices. It argues that failure to adequately engage with the neo-liberal economic order has resulted in ecclesial leadership that is increasingly losing public trust as perceptions of the leaders and the offices that they control are being corrupted by their insatiable appetite for financial greed. Contemporary ecclesial leaderships are caught in an ethical conundrum through their inability to missionally negotiate the spiritually disarming, attractive and additive lure of the ideologies of neoliberalism and neo-conservatism that are weakening the effectiveness of religious leaders who are easily entrapped because of their 'love of money'. Their inability to exercise critical distance from the infectious and addictive lure of greed has compromised the authenticity of their integrity and the witness of the church's mission in the world to be in solidarity with people that live on the margins of society (Keum 2012:14-16). The fall in ecclesial standards of leadership in exercising authentic social responsibility within communities of oppressed peoples living on the margins has now placed the need for ethical formation at the centre of ecclesial leadership within the African context. The fast growth in urbanization with millions of Africans being attracted to cities for work, study and living, has led to the rise of many

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independent charismatic/ Pentecostal communities led by self-styled charismatic 'Prophets', 'Apostles' 'Bishops' and 'Pastors'. They operate an allinclusive ecclesial business with vast budgets within the communities of the poor that are experiencing socio-economic injustices that are fallouts from the neo-liberal economic policies that have been and continue to be adopted by their governments. The article concludes that the ethical formation that is needed to address the lack of credibility and public trust of ecclesial leadership serving communities experiencing socio-economic injustices necessitates, in Christian context, radical reformation in which leaders rediscover what Orbery Hendricks describes as 'the politics of Jesus'. Christian leaders need to rediscover the true revolutionary nature of the historical Jesus' teachings and practices (2006:5-10). Within the African context it will necessitate engaging in a spirituality of resistance against life life-denying forces of neo-liberal greed, and to do justice as a matter of faith confession and praxis. This would mean that African ecclesial leaders would embrace matters of economic and environmental justice, which are not only social, political, and moral issues but at the core, a matter of confessing the Christian faith (The Accra Confession 2004).

Keywords: ecclesial leadership, neo-liberalism, social responsibility, social cohesion, spirituality, economic injustice

Introduction

Christianity function as the dominant religion in many nations of Sub-Saharan Africa. In Zambia the government changed the constitution to declare Zambia to be 'a Christian nation' (Kaunda 2017). In this era of African political discourse, many states are encountering economic instability that is having negative impacts on social cohesion. Africa fits into the landscape of what is classified as the 'Global South', a term that describes how developing economies, most of which are in the Southern hemisphere², are coping with the onslaught of the socio-economic impact of globalization (Boesak & Hansen 2009:59-72). New Zealand and Australia are the only two nations in the South that economically belong to the global North!

² I.e. with the two exceptions of the economies of Australia and New Zealand.

The liberation movements that fought against colonial governance of their nation eventually evolved into political parties that formed the government of their newly independent nation. However their success in defeating colonialism was not transferred into offering good governance. The promise of 'better life for all' has in many cases become an 'an own goal' in underdevelopment in which some states have become poorer since independence through increasing 'erosion of democracy', 'social polarization', political and economic instability (Boesak & Hansen 2009:23-25)

The contemporary socio-economic landscape of these African nations is characterized by a hybrid neo-liberal economic model³ where transnational companies are given freedom to plunder the limited resources seeking raw materials and in so doing severely damaging the environment. Environmental degradation is accompanied by soil erosion, deforestation, climate change, drought, flood, disappearing of fish stocks and fresh water. The social consequences of such environmental changes have resulted in significant disruption and decline of social cohesion in many communities leaving increasing number of people living on the margins.

With political independence, many African nations welcomed nationalistic forms of governments that advocated a socialist model of economic development. However, their dream of having a sustained and growing economy that could respond to the needs of their growing population was short lived. International market forces exploited their vulnerable economy plus local factor of corruption and inefficiencies made the economies non-competitive at the global market place. The failure to generate sufficient funds to meet their budgetary needs as young nations, meant that borrowing to supplement the budget came from external sources at rate of interests and it so doing, the local currencies were severely devalued. The unbalanced development of the economy that favoured some sections of industry while impacting negatively on other areas, created increasing poverty levels, especially in many of the big cities of the African continent with tens of million in population.

Poor quality of governance therefore constitutes a burning issue in

restraints or protections'.

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³ In the Accra confession of 2004, neo-liberalism: 'refers to a political-economic philosophy that de-emphasizes or rejects government or other intervention in the economy; it would allow the market to operate without

many countries of the Global South. The paradox is that the political movements of liberation have won electoral victory of the political left controlling government but the economic power has remained with the political right and their (neo-liberal economic policies) that offer a 'democracy' that produces progressive poverty, high inequalities and exclusion for the common people. Democracy in the contemporary neoliberal model functions like a bubble in a very delicate state of existence that can easily burst and have its life-sustaining contents spilt (Hewitt 2014: 1-3) The economy of these nations function under many regulations (red-tapes) that fosters corruption rather than honest and open competition. The highly indebted economies thrive on unfettered consumerism rather than indigenous built industries that use local resources. The acute pyramid-like structures of the economic make little or no room for social obligation that protects the poor and the weak. The processes of economic growth and wealth accumulation for the few takes priority over the welfare of the common good of the people.

In addition the current world economic disorder according to the 2004 Accra Confession statement demands great urgency because global economic injustice and ecological destruction that is 'imposed by global neoliberal capitalism and any other economic system, including absolute planned economies, which defy God's covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life' (The Accra Confession: para 18-29)

Evans (2005:197) has argued that 'liberalism preaches the false universalism of 'free trade' for all, while, in reality, the contemporary neoliberal trading system does not even offer the South a level playing field'. Therefore, internal (national) incompetence, inefficiencies and corruption mixed with external (imperial) financial assault through globalization on the African economies have destroyed millions of lives.

It is into this socio-economic landscape that ecclesial leadership within the diverse African context operates. The colonial environment in which ecclesial leadership was first introduced and developed sought to serve the people in contexts where their strategic partnerships with governments resulted in many social services such as schools, health services and in some cases agriculture and community development projects being delegated to the mission churches as first responders. However, with the departure of most European missionaries from the leadership of the local churches after independence their absence also contributed to the decline of external financial

resources for the support of the many social services that were handed over to the churches. Furthermore the newly independent states being overwhelmed with diverse demands on the national budget were unable allocate the needed financial resources support many of their institutions. Many of the former mission Churches that became 'independent' from their European sponsored Churches also failed to generate sufficient resources to maintain and further develop their inherited social welfare institutions such as schools and hospitals. In the end some were handed over to the state, others closed and a few continue to function as missional expressions of the churches.

The most pressing threat to life in many of the African countries are linked to the growing scandalous gulf of inequality between the minority economically empowered class and the economically dispossessed that is creating a fearful reaction resulting in social dislocation, collective mutiny/rebellion by desperate people crying out for justice. In certain part of countries such as Northern Nigeria, South Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia are engaged in civil conflict that involved terror groups that transcends national boundaries and they serve as a magnet for the toxic mixtures of de-humanizing forces that feed on unresolved ethnic, religious, political and economic tensions. Rogue political and in some cases religious leaders have put their egos ahead of the interest of their people to exploit the unstable and fearful environment to ensure their hold on political power. Democracy in such contexts exists as a commodity to be captured and sold to the highest bidder.

All of this is happening within a global context of rapid technological changes in which the social media are creating shocks in different sectors of life that is pushing everyone to live life in the fast lane, and build their physical and emotional health on a diet of instant products. This new mode of living is identified as being in a 'liquid or plastics state' because life becomes,

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⁴ Tracing the process how poverty and inequality evolved within South Africa, Julian May POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA, Centre for Social and Development Studies, University of Natal, http://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/31219257/presentation.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId =AKIAJ56TQJRTWSMTNPEA&Expires=1470738511&Signature=WZ2sA k1%2FmNFMBlJB01%2BQg1CB0sw%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DPoverty_and_inequality_in_South_Africa.pdf. (Accessed on 09 August 2016.)

shapelessly shifting as each disruptive innovation or abandoned certitude outstrips whatever fleeting sense of meaning was only recently embraced. A kind of foreboding of the times that have not yet arrived, a wariness about what's next, settles in (Gardel 2016)

Ecclesial leadership

Ecclesial leadership have historically played an important role in the development of African nations. Their role at this juncture when many states are encountering socio-political and economic raid unpredictable changes has posed important questions about the quality of leadership formation that is serving many African churches and the societies in which they serve. New attitudes and skills are needed especially in African societies where traditional leadership of the Elders is still the cultural norm. This article redefines ecclesial leadership as a complex phenomenon because of its symbiotic relationship between the secular and the spiritual world (Gibbs 2005:17).

Robert Banks and Bernice Ledbetter (2004:26-27) state that leadership,

involves a person, group, or organization who shows the way in an area of life - whether in the short- or the long-term - and in doing so both influences and empowers enough people to bring about change in the area.

However, leadership does not function in isolation but in relation with a team. One of the sad features of contemporary ecclesial leadership is the perception of the public that its mode of operation is domineering and prestige seeking rather than being servant leadership modelled on the life and work of the historical Jesus who came 'not to be served but to serve' (Mark 10:45)⁵.

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⁵ Vis-à-vis the liberal-historicist nineteenth and twentieth century interpretations of the inquiry into the historical Jesus, there is a new emerging consensus among socio-cultural historians of Jesus as historical figure, *viz.*, that Jesus was indeed a Jewish prophetic and wisdom, servant-leader, that proclaimed the coming of the rule/ Kingdom of God, the renewal of the covenant community promised to Israel in the Jewish Scriptures, and the calling of Israel to repentance, in Jewish-apocalyptic context. This picture is

According to Gibbs, ecclesial leadership must be shaped by context because different situations require distinctive forms of leadership gifts, endowed with character, charisma and competence (2005:27). To these I would also add, commitment, compassionate and consistent. A paradigm shift in ecclesial leadership matrix is overdue in this age that counter the addition to the 'lone ranger' and individual 'messiah complex' model that is popularised in many areas of contemporary African ecclesial leadership.

The Changing Landscape of African Christianity

African ecclesial leadership is serving in a postmodern context in which the landscape of global Christianity is radically changing. The World Council of Churches (WCC) 2013 Mission statement, 'Together Towards Life' (Keum 2013:5-6) identified the following shifts in the global changing landscape of Christianity since the 1980s, brought on by global forces of change,

- Majority of Christians either are living or have their origins in the global South and East;
- Migration has become a worldwide, multi-directional phenomenon which is reshaping the Christian landscape;
- The emergence of strong Pentecostal and charismatic movements from different localities is one of the most noteworthy characteristics of world Christianity today;
- people at the margins are claiming their key role as agents of mission and affirming mission as transformation;

very much correctly represented by the Gospel of Mark and Q (as represented, especially in the Gospel of Luke, but also Matthew). As is evident from these texts, the historical Jesus also operated in primarily rural Galilean, agricultural and fishing village context, and not in the two or three bigger Galilean cities. For this emerging consensus, cf. Crossan ([1991] 2010); Collins (2000); Horsley ([1997] 2002. 2001; 2008); Freyne (2004); Draper and Horsley in Horsley (2006); and Fiensy & Hawkins (2013). For an economic perspective, cf. Horsley (2009; and 2015) and the chapters in Fiensy & Hawkins (2013); and an integrative perspective, Horsley (2008). For the social-historical positioning of Jesus within the first century Christian movement, cf. also Stegemann and Stegemann (1999).

• The church lives in multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts and new communication technology is also bringing the people of the world into a greater awareness of one another's identities and pursuits.

These forces are also impacting on the development of Christianity within Africa. The global technocratic culture that is transported by economic globalisation is creating upheavals in all forms of traditional institutional arrangements of pedagogy and governance, whether they are religious, political or socio-economic. Institutional leaderships offered by schools, churches, political parties and security forces are increasing losing public trust and support.

The neo-liberal economic order with its *laissez faire* approach to life that accompanies the democratic ordering of society especially in the West has resulted in religious expressions and organizations operate without much government or legal controls. Contemporary society has seen a mushrooming of diverse charismatic personalities forming their 'own churches'. This type of populist brand of Christianity has been classified as the 'prosperity gospel' that adopt a kind of 'mallification of the church'6 in which everything done is for profit. The Lausanne Theology Working Group has defined Prosperity Gospel as, 'the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the 'sowing of seeds' through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings'. This relationship between faith and economic prosperity has resulted in a type of pornification of Christianity especially by leaders with an appetite for greed and the gratification of desire (Hewitt 2017:5). This commodification of the Christian faith by some ecclesial leaders has resulted in the power of money being used to buy 'miraculous healing' and so giving increased 'faith benefits to those with greater financial resources to reward the leader.

The 21st century has seen the 'ascendancy of moral lowlifes' as the

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⁶ This coined term 'mallification' refers to the emerging architectural design of mega churches that are designed to look like shopping malls where they offer 'all in on services': worship centre, entertainment facilities, health centres, restaurants, gyms and end education institutions.

⁷ The Lausanne Theology Working Group, Statement on the Prosperity Gospel 2010, https://www.lausanne.org/content/a-statement-on-the-prosperity-gospel

standard of leadership in many of institutions of governance (Hewitt: 2010). The perennial temptations of avarice and abuse of power and privileges by leaders has become toxic and destroying public trust in national leaders. Even among sections of the Church in Africa some of the leaders have succumbed to embracing a prosperity priority gospel built on greed and deception that appeals to the gullible crowd seeking instant health and wealth benefits from the miraculous religious leader. The bad media reports on institutional models of leadership have not escaped the ecclesial community. The questions that they asked are generally linked to the quality of leadership that is being offered to the society. Untrustworthy ecclesial leadership has been reported preying on the vulnerable and fleecing them of the little financial resources of the poor with promises of them receiving a miracle. Indeed, the trustworthy index of the clergy in some countries is declining and is viewed alongside the low trust that people have of politicians. Although in many African communities, the pastor is still regarded as a revered elder who must be treated with great cultural respect, the trust index at the national levels in much lower. In a generally declining economic environment of being experience by many countries, the religious sector is still a major significant growth industry as entrepreneurs actively invest in multi-media mass religious gatherings that are later established as profit-making businesses. This article therefore argues that the quality spirituality that informs such ecclesial leadership is ethically flawed and missional lacking in the politics of Jesus' servant leadership that Hendricks (2006: 99-190) describes as, 'treat people's needs as holy', 'give voice to the voiceless', 'expose the workings of oppression', 'call the demons by name', 'saves his anger for the mistreatment of others' 'take blows without returning them' and 'Don't just explain the alternative, show it'.

New African Ecclesial Leadership for Changing Times

Therefore, what is indispensable for ecclesial spiritual leadership to be authentic in contexts of political and economic injustice and environmental threats to life is an urgent need for radical ethical reformation that embraces social responsibility. This kind of spiritual leadership must be theological informed by an enlightened missional understanding of the connectivity between poverty, wealth and ecology, the three inescapable determinants of people's wellbeing in their communities (Mshana 2012: 7-11).

If the example of the historical Jesus's servant leadership is the model for all ecclesial leaders then their contemporary engagement in context of economic injustices cannot be a matter of dominion and lordship over others but of self -emptying (kenosis) spirituality. It is in this area that African ecclesial leaders should be learning from their local communities that put emphasis on traditional cultural and religious heritages of Ubuntu (I am because we are) /uzima (life in wholeness)/ ujamaa (humaneness) and baraza (consultative decision-making) that put a premium on the relational dimension of life (Mshana 2012:12). The African traditional way of life also requires authentic spiritualty that builds just social relationships for the wellbeing of a community. A return to this fundamental way of life constitutes one of the most urgent challenges facing African leadership. They must choose the unpopular option of embodying a spirituality that works towards the common good of all creation instead of surrendering to the selfish competitive forces that reward the greed of a few at the expense of the many who are usually poor. A radical re-appropriation of the God of life is needed in the contemporary era where expressions of faith have become commodified and packaged and sold to the global market place like designer drugs.

Theosis Spirituality for Social Responsibility

For African ecclesial leaders to be genuinely transformed to greater social responsibility within their context of economic injustices and environmental degradation, then, according to Michael Gorman (2015:1-20), they must radically embrace 'Becoming the Gospel' in order to genuinely transform lives and the socioeconomic and the environmental context in which many people on the margins within the nations of Africa live. Theologically this kind of lifestyle can be described as embracing a spirituality of theosis. According to Gorman, in Christianity, 'the telos is about Divine intention and action, human transformation, and the telos of human existence - union with God (2004:5). The core focus of theosis is on becoming like and imitating the nature of God seen in the example of the historical Jesus, the teacher who has set the standard for a spiritual lifestyle. It involves transformative actions of participation in the life and character of the God of life as reflected in the Jesus ministry and mission (2015: 26-32). This means that the spirituality formation of church leaders for social transformation and social responsibility can only be

effectively formed through risk taking participation in the mission of God (*missio Dei*), who, according to the Judeo-Christian scriptures, is on a mission to liberate humanity and the entire cosmos (2015: 24-25).

Therefore the important challenge that ecclesial leaders within sub-Saharan Africa face is how best to live out responsible citizenship within the communities that they serve and also to become immerse into the praxis of becoming the gospel and to live it out in ways that can facilitate social responsibility within a climate of economic injustice. The concern is not so much about the status of the profession but the character of the leadership practitioners. Indeed, it could also be argued that the dilemma of trust that is facing many African churches is generated not only in the life style of the leaders but in their archaic undemocratic and unaccountable systems of governance that alienate and exclude stake holders from full participation in the important matters that affect their lives and work. The leaders offer words without life that are often used to wheel power and rule over others rather than to build life-affirming communities that love and forgive one another.

Spirituality for Resistance: Do Justice! Love Mercy! Walk Humble!

Pat Sheerattah-Bisnauth argues spirituality constitutes an indispensable resource that ultimately transforms the individual from being possessed with selfish agendas to focusing on the common good of the entire community (2009). There is no academic consensus on what exactly 'spirituality' really mean because of the vagueness in certain aspects of its identity. However, it remains a reality that is acknowledged and experienced in every human community as they seek for deeper meaning and purpose to the challenges of life (Hewitt 2014:1). It can therefore be argued that all institutional systems of belief 'sustain their identity, vocation and witness through an embedded spirituality that is not a fixed concept, but dynamic in that it is always transforming reality by embracing and relinquishing people's allegiance from time to time. It has to do with how we are being grasped by reality when we are in a liminal space' (Hewitt 2014:1). Spirituality is therefore an innate and intangible life-sustaining reality that communicates the quality, condition or uniqueness of one's identity. Whereas all religions possess different forms of spirituality, within the Christian religion, spirituality is focused on lifestyles

that demonstrate sacredness or holiness, mysticism and devoutness in order to achieve a specific purpose.

Konrad Raiser (Mshana 2004: 5) poses this pertinent question: What does spirituality have to do with wealth creation, economic globalization or the commodification of public goods'? In response, Raiser argues that the changing landscape has led to great understanding that spirituality cannot be restricted to the private sphere of life but must also engage with the public including financial and economic system (2004: 5). Therefore the traditional definition of spirituality that ecclesial leaders embrace tends to be linked to a lifestyle of prayer, fasting, contemplation and 'waiting upon God'. However in addition to this lifestyle which in monastic tradition is accompanied by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, contemporary ecumenical focus on spirituality expands the understand to include struggles for justice and human dignity (2004:7). If then spirituality is about the struggle for life then authentic struggle embraces the mode of resistance ...saying no to death-dealing powers and yes to Good's power for fullness of life.

Spirituality for Economic Justice

It is into this understanding of spirituality that one locates the imperative of the social responsibility challenges facing African ecclesial leaders.

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it (Mark 8:34-35).

'Cross bearing' has become a vital ingredient for spirituality formation of church leaders. Cross bearing is usually associated with a willingness to suffer and risk one's personal freedom for the sake of truth and justice that will give others freedom (Mark 16:24). This sacrificial way of living becomes a powerful spiritual resource to fight against the imperial demonic systems of life denying powers in our contemporary world. A perquisite that informs the spirituality formation of leaders is the experience of demonstrating the power of prayer in the challenge of living out the Christian life in difficult sociopolitical contexts. Another necessary character trait for authentic spiritual leadershipis the rejection of the infectious virus of greed and embracing a

discipline life of self-control. This kind of lifestyle is urgently needed in the contemporary era where the tempting advertisements snares of the consumerist society of the global marketplace places value on acquiring material goods rather than caring for the wellbeing of people. Many African nations are increasingly becoming unstable because their leaders within the private and public sector have failed the citizens because of their corrupt behaviour. Political and economic corruption had become so endemic within the society that only radical surgery could address the systemic problem that necessitates enforcement of just laws that hold corrupt officials accountable and be fully punished by the judiciary process. Spirituality within the African context that is effective must therefore equip church leaders for life-giving transformative social relationship engagement and not to cut them off from the communities that they are serving. This spirituality must empower leaders to participate in the people's struggle for political and economic justice. Such a spirituality may equip a lifestyle that engenders fidelity to the practice of high moral standards in its political and economic ethic.

If African leaders are to take seriously their calling to provide leadership to the life denying contextual challenges facing the lives of ordinary people and the wider nation, then a mature and effective spirituality is needed at every level of their identity, vocation and witness that is oriented towards the building of wholesome and just social relationships. This model of spiritual engagement is fashioned on the notion that as the leader grows deeper with (imitating) Christ and is therefore equip for bold risk taking life-giving service. The tensions between the potential and the frailty of being a leader are real and it is therefore easy for leaders to wear mask or put their lives in compartments to hide their real identity, faking it week after week, 'keeping up of appearances' and deceiving their unsuspecting congregants! However, this faking of spiritualty among leaders can only last for a while because it lack authentic consistent life-giving power and authority for the medium and long haul journey with people in local communities who can discern a fraudulent leader who does not facilitate the building of wholesome social relationships

Authenticity cannot be Faked forever by a Consistently Deceptive Leader

Therefore the spirituality that is needed for leadership must be shaped by honest answers to some core and challenging questions: What is the African

ecclesial leader's understanding of her/his calling? Is a profession or a vocation? Is it a status symbol or service towards building social responsibility in local communities? The intense pressures for leaders to validate the authenticity of their social responsibility has resulted in many experiencing a spirituality identity crisis.

Leadership at the best of times, is a hard and demanding service with a high and costly calling and accountability. Measurement of the effectiveness is difficult because of perceptions about the transcendental nature of role that is incarnated with human frailties and this makes any measurement risky and questionable. This is because any measurement of spirituality will be a very subjective exercise and therefore failing to receive consensual agreement on the interpretation of the findings. In the contemporary climate of distrust of institutional leadership, those who are called or have chosen the path of ecclesial leadership within the African context must take the lead to work towards authentic spirituality that exhibits effective social responsibility if they are to regain and sustain trust of the common people and so increase their effectiveness within local communities. In is in the life of the local community seeking for fullness of life where the spirituality of the leaders is nurtured and developed for better or for worse. The leader and the members of the local community are in symbiotic relationship. They need each other and the quality of their identity, vocation and witness depends on the maturity of their spirituality.

Conclusion

The way forward points to an increasing need for a radical ethical reformation of African ecclesial leadership that intentionally embraces a spirituality that is expressed through the praxis of just social responsibility for economic and environmental justice and radically informed by Transformative Theosis. This change in lifestyle calls for risky participation in the struggles of people seeking justice and finding effective contemplative practices that will spiritually empower them to live positively in the fast changing postmodern culture (Delbecq Andre, June 2000). The Triune God of life and the theosis spirituality perspective model that undergirds this focus of nurturing the leaders' spirituality within the African context. Only so will they move toward a lifestyle of greater intentional interdependence between politics, economics and civil society and confession of faith. When the leader's spirituality

embraces the ordinary people struggle for justice, they will be will become the gospel by nurturing a spirituality that, 'ensures the ecological and social sustainability of competition and Strengthening the primacy of politics in a global context' (Re-modelling the Social Market Economy: 8).

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