



# The Formational Journey of Emerging Ecclesial Leaders

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The objective of the paper is to propose a formational model that comprises the ecclesial leader's theology, spiritual formation, and character. Emerging ecclesial leaders who desire to have the longevity of ministry will need to take heed of these three important formational components which are constantly interacting with each other in leaders' life journey. The three components have direct relationships with leadership theories and praxis as they shape leaders' values and behaviors. The Bible also supports the importance of these three formational components as written in God's dealing with many Bible characters which will be examined together with the constructs of these components.

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Every minister who has dedicated his life to serving the Lord in full-time ministry desires to finish his life and ministry well. Although the statistic for successful long-term ministers is not the most encouraging (Spencer, Winston, & Bocarnea, 2011), it is still vital for ecclesial leaders to complete their ministry well. While waiting for his execution, Apostle Paul demonstrated the importance of finishing well through his own life when he wrote in 2 Timothy 4:7-8 that he had fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith, and waiting to receive the crown of righteousness from the Lord. However, the reality of ministry shows that many ministers will leave the ministry due to moral failure, emotional burnt-out, financial needs or relational challenges within the church (George, 2009; Strong, 2017; Whitson, 2014). Many of these ministers and their families will leave the church, and some will never fully recover from these negative experiences. Although there is a greater awareness in the Body of Christ in restoring wounded and fallen ministers, it is even more crucial for preventive methods to be put in place to reduce such unfortunate cases from happening. Furthermore, the complexity in restoring wounded ministers is accentuated by the need to involve denomination leaders, faith communities, family, and the minister. It is not an easy journey to see the full restoration of ministers even in the case where all these complex factors are involved in the recovery process. Therefore, it is far better for ecclesial leaders to consider ways to empower emerging ministers to finish well right at the beginning of

their ministry. The paper intends to propose a formational model for emerging ecclesial leaders to consider and take time to grow in these areas if they desire to finish well in their sacred vocation as a minister of the gospel. The model is recommended after examining literature written by scholars and researchers who have highlighted the various essential factors from the perspective of pastoral theology (Trull & Carter, 2004; Willimon, 2016), spiritual formation (Foster, 1989; Wheeler, 2017), and character development (Clinton, 2012; McNeal, 2000; Willimon, 2000). After analyzing the overlapping concepts and similar constructs, the formational model proposes three key components of theology, spiritual formation, and character. All three components are of equal importance where they are always interacting with each other within the lives of ecclesial leaders throughout their ministry journeys. The following sections will explain the constructs of the three components and their formational importance in empowering ecclesial leaders to finish well in their ministries.

## Theology

Erickson (2015) has defined theology as the study of God. It is achieved through “the careful, systematic study, analysis, and statement of Christian doctrine” (p. 4). The process of this careful and systematic study of God alters one’s understanding of who God is, and can shape one’s worldviews of the surrounding environments. McGrath (2011) has explained that “Christian theology is not just a set of ideas; it is about making possible a new way of seeing ourselves, others, and the world, with implications for the way in which we behave” (p. 102). Theology is more than a set of information that one gathers as it can form one’s understanding and behaviors towards self and others. Geiger and Peck (2016) believe that good theology forms the foundational basis of ecclesial leaders’ convictions and values in Christian ministry. Willimon (2016) has also emphasized that leaders’ theological convictions will determine the expressions and outworking of their ecclesial organizations. Therefore, theology forms a vital component of leaders’ formation as it shapes values and convictions that determine their behaviors and decision-making process when leading their ecclesial organizations. The Apostle Paul was an excellent example of an ecclesial leader who had a strong theological foundation in Old Testament scriptures. Through his theological depth and clarity, he shaped the early Church ministries and doctrines through his pastoral letters, especially among the Gentile believers. Leaders will require similar theological depth and understanding to navigate the complexity of leading ecclesial organizations in the current world. Apostle Peter was another example where his theology of God limited his ministry to the Jews until the Lord showed him through a vision to preach the gospel to Cornelius’ Gentile household (Acts 10). Through Peter’s change of theological position for the Gentiles, he paved the way for the early Church to preach the gospel of Christ to the Gentile world.

## Formal Theological Education

Quinn, Foote, & Williams (2012) have observed the changing trend within seminaries and bible colleges that more students are taking part-time online programs as their on-going education rather than full-time residential programs. Online programs are getting more popular as they provide the flexibility for students to hold on to their day jobs while undergoing their theological study. Students save financial resources as they do not need to relocate themselves and their families as required in full-time residential programs (Hines, McGee, Waller, & Waller, 2009). Although the mode of delivery and the expectations of students may have changed with time and technology, the need for proper formal theological education has not diminished (Cronshaw, 2011; Esselman, 2004). The rapid changes in the world today require ecclesial leaders who are theologically equipped and competent to address human needs with God's truths. Bible colleges and seminaries are the most appropriate institutions to provide the necessary rigor to train ecclesial leaders to frame and address issues theologically. The theological foundations are vital to preparing leaders to address unforeseen changes in society without compromising biblical truths and staying relevant to the needs of modernity.

The Apostle Paul was more effective than other early Church leaders in addressing ecclesial issues through his pastoral epistles because of his theological training as a Pharisees under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), who was one of the best teachers of his time (Polhill, 1992). Paul's theological foundation had provided him with the necessary knowledge and understanding of the Jewish laws to effectively correct false teachings and address wrong Jewish cultural expectations on the Gentile believers. The book of Romans is another prime example of Paul's theological contribution to the Christian world where he had brilliantly argued on salvation solely by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's well-grounded theological education played a critical role in his outstanding and effective ministry in the early Church.

## Leadership Praxis

Theology plays a significant role in the expressions of leadership in the ministry of ecclesial leaders (Beeley, 2009). Since theology shapes the worldviews of leaders and assists in the formation of their Christian values, it will determine their leadership behaviors and praxis. Huizing (2011) believes that ecclesial leaders' understanding of ecclesiology will directly influence their practice of leadership in the context of their ministries. Ecclesial leaders whose ecclesiology is influenced by the leadership of Moses and Joshua in the Old Testament will use highly directive and autocratic leadership styles that demand absolute obedience from followers (Numbers 12:5-8, 16:28-33). They believe that their leadership is unquestionable by their followers as the former receive direction and authority from God in leading their ecclesial organizations. They associate themselves as God's chosen leaders set apart with the divine authority to represent God to their followers. On the other hand, ecclesial leaders whose ecclesiology is shaped by

the New Testament early Church leadership will use more consultative and relational servant leadership style that seeks for collaborative success. The early Church leaders demonstrated a plurality of leadership through their decision-making process in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) and the appointment of elders and deacons as instructed by Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 2. Jesus' teaching on servant leadership in Matthew 20:20-28 and the washing of his disciples' feet in John 10 further encouraged the early Church leaders to adopt a servant leadership style in leading and serving their house churches (Clark, 2000). Therefore, ecclesial leaders' praxis is determined by their theology where good theological foundations will lead to healthier ministries and organizations.

### **Regular Review of Biased Theology**

The Apostle Paul's dramatic encounter with God on the road to Damascus in Acts 9 and the Apostle Peter's encounter in Acts 10 are examples of the need for a review of one's theology in the context of one's ministry. Both of these apostles carried biased views in their ministries because of social and political prejudices and discriminations (Longenecker, 1981; Polhill, 1992). The review of theology is necessary given one's ministry experiences and possible divine encounters that require a revisit to deepen the understanding of God. Such a review is not to question the divinity of Christ and the core doctrines of Christianity that have been evaluated in Church history. It is to allow ecclesial leaders to examine presuppositions, prejudices, and discriminations that need to be eradicated and replaced by a proper understanding of God's truths. Since theology shapes ecclesial leaders in their ministry values and affects their leadership behaviors, they should set aside time to regularly review their theology in response to their experiences in ministry and examine if there are biased views that require corrections and changes. One of the areas that theology can affect ecclesial leaders' behaviors is in spiritual formation as it determines how they relate with God through their regular spiritual disciplines and practices.

### **Spiritual Formation**

Spiritual formation has taken an emphasis in the Christian world with the renewed interest in the inner life formation of believers. Tang (2014) and Teo (2017) have raised the challenges of having a unified definition of spiritual formation in the Body of Christ. However, an appropriate working definition is necessary for this discussion since spiritual formation is one of the key formational components of ecclesial leaders. Willard (2002) has defined spiritual formation as the "Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself" (p. 22). Willard believes that a Christian takes on the character of Christ and becomes like him when true spiritual formation takes place. McGarry (2012) has described Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of spiritual formation as "Christ conforming the church into sameness with him" (p. 235). The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) has defined spiritual formation as "the biblically

guided process in which people are being transformed into the likeness of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit within the faith community in order to love and serve God and others” (CCCU, 2011, p. 13). All of these definitions have pointed to spiritual formation as a process where an individual or the Body of Christ is shaped and transformed by the Holy Spirit inwardly to become more like Jesus Christ. This inner life transformation process will then eventually affect one’s relationship with others and the world.

Ecclesial leaders who desire to finish well in their ministry must take intentional effort to ensure that the process of inner life formation takes place within them. They need to deliberately plan their time for spiritual disciplines, self-nurturance, healthy intimacy with others, and to deal with negative emotions and failures that they encounter in the ministry with godly perspectives (Wicks, 1995). Hands and Fehr (1993) have listed three practices that emerging ecclesial leaders can establish to enhance and safeguard their inner life spiritual formation. These three practices are namely, Spiritual Renewal Practices, Rest-taking Practices, and Support System Practices.

### **Spiritual Renewal Practices**

Spiritual Renewal Practices (SRP) are spiritually orientated activities that facilitate ecclesial leaders in having communion with God where their relationships with him are intimately deepened (Chandler, 2009). Ministers with an intimate relationship with God will experience God’s transformative work and a strong sense of the Holy Spirit’s leading and empowerment in their ministries (Gemignani, 2002; Nelson, 2002). Nouwen (2001) has advocated for ministers to have intimate relationships with Jesus Christ to develop their inner strength and guidance for long-term ministries. Some of these common SRP include spiritual disciplines such as Bible study, prayer, worship, fasting, meditation, solitude, and reflection (Foster, 1989; Whitney, 1991; Willard, 1988). These are spiritual disciplines that the Lord Jesus took time to engage in when he was on earth.

The New Testament scriptures have examples of Jesus Christ living out SRP as a full human being on earth. Jesus went through forty days of fasting where the devil tempted him in the wilderness (Matthew 4). Although it was the Holy Spirit who led him into the wilderness, Jesus went through fasting to draw close to God for strength and spiritual receptivity to overcome the various temptations (Blomberg, 1992). He also taught on the posture and attitude towards fasting in Sermon on the Mount where prayer was often coupled with fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). Jesus also taught his disciples to pray using the Lord’s Prayer model which was very different from the way that his fellow Jews would engage God (Matthew 6:6-13). He introduced the concept of God as the Heavenly Father through the Lord’s Prayer where one could have an intimate relationship with the Almighty Creator God. Jesus also modeled prayer through his own life when he withdrew from the crowds to pray in solitude (Matthew 14:23, 26:36-

44; Mark 1:35, 6:46; Luke 5:16, 9:28). Jesus also led the disciples in times of reflection where he would use the reflection process to teach and help them better understand Kingdom truths (Matthew 16:13-19, 17:1-13, 17:19-21; Mark 9:28-29). The early Church also demonstrated SRP after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through their devotion to the Apostles' teaching, worship, and prayer (Acts 2:42-46, 4:24-31). The depth of their devotion led to a changed worldview and lifestyle where many sold their possessions to meet the various needs among the early Church.

## **Rest-taking Practices**

Rest-taking Practices (RTP) are restful initiatives that enable emerging ecclesial leaders to renew depleted spiritual, emotional, mental and physical reserves (Chandler, 2009). These initiatives can be non-ministry related activities that enhance leaders' personal renewal in their holistic beings or simply the absence of doing ministry-related activities that may deplete their inner life and emotional vitality (London & Wiseman, 2003). Ecclesial leaders must not view ministry busyness as a mark of godliness in ministry and neglect their physical and spiritual health in pursuit of endless ministry activities. RTP serve to provide healthy boundaries for ministers to facilitate the disengagement from ministry and find the necessary rhythm of rest on an ongoing basis. This rhythm of rest is also mentioned in the Bible through the concept of a Sabbath rest day within the week.

The concept of Sabbath was set in place since the creation account when God rested on the seventh day after six days of creation activities (Genesis 2). Although God did not need to rest as an omnipotent spiritual being, he chose to rest on the seventh day to celebrate and enjoy the fruit and achievement of his creation (Kidner, 1967). It was the only day during the creation week that God had blessed and consecrated it to be a holy day (Genesis 2:3). The importance and holiness of this rest day were again mentioned and highlighted in the Fourth Commandment when God gave the Decalogue to Israel (Exodus 20:8, 11). The Israelites were reminded of the importance of this holy day when God rested and commanded them to observe it as a pattern of rest as God's chosen people. Sabbath observance set the entire nation of Israel apart to be God's chosen possession and a witness to the surrounding idol worshipping countries (Mathews, 1996). When Israel observed the Sabbath rest, they shared in the celebration and declaration of God as the Creator of the universe and experienced the "sense of completeness and well-being that God had accomplished at creation in behalf of all human life" (p. 180). Moses' instructions to Israel in the Deuteronomy Decalogue added another dimension of understanding to the observance of Sabbath. Moses presented Sabbath as freedom from work and related it to the Lord's deliverance of Israel that freed them from the Egyptian enslavement (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Sabbath was a reminder of their freedom from slavery. Therefore, Sabbath is both a rest from work as modeled by God in the creation account and also a freedom from the slavery of work to enjoy one's identity as God's people.

## Support System Practices

Support System Practices (SSP) are initiatives to provide ecclesial leaders with social support groups that will allow them to have a safe environment for open sharing, accountability, and support (Chandler, 2009; London & Wiseman, 2003). Social support systems are found to be critical for the long-term health of leaders to prevent social isolation, loneliness, and emotional burnout (Hands & Fehr, 1993; Spaite, 1999). Leaders' involvement in leading small groups as part of their church ministries cannot be considered as their social support systems as most ministers will take on the role of a leader and spiritual shepherd to provide discipleship and care in these groups. The social support systems must be a place where leaders are with fellow peers that provide a strong sense of belonging and opportunity for genuine mutual edification and vulnerability (Gilbert, 1987). Social support groups facilitate leaders to experience spiritual formation through their relationships with God and others in an environment where they can be vulnerable and open about their struggles, weaknesses, and developments. Tang (2014) has described such communities as crucibles where "spiritual formation originates, takes form and develops" (p. 185). He believes that communities play a major influential role in forming and shaping the inner life of believers. It is also through these nurturing communities that leaders see and find God in the familiarity of fulfilling the routine work of ministry (Rupp, 1995).

The Bible has given many examples of community and the need for social support for each other. At the beginning of creation, the Godhead, who lived in the community of the Trinity, saw the need for Adam to have a partner who could relate with him in the early stage of creation (Genesis 2:18-25). It was God and not Adam who identified the inner need for a similar creature who could relate and form a social community with him (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010). God then created Eve to allow another human being to become his partner to rule and reign on earth. Jesus Christ also demonstrated the need for social support group through the selection and designation of his apostles who followed him throughout his ministry on earth (Matthew 10:2). Out of the twelve disciples, Jesus had three disciples comprising Peter, James, and John who formed the inner circle of Jesus' social support network (Matthew 17:1-13; 26:37-38). Demarest (2010) has highlighted the harmonious community and relationships shared between the Godhead of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The community life within the Godhead serves as a perfect model for the spiritual formation of believers within a community. Leaders' participation and involvement in nurturing communities and social support groups will allow them to experience the true unity and relational life that take place within the Trinity.

Therefore, ecclesial leaders will require intentional effort and involvement of faith communities to facilitate spiritual formation within their inner life through these three practices. However, ecclesial leaders' formation will not be holistic with only theology and spiritual formation until the character is equally developed in the process.

## Character

Character is another key formation component of ecclesial leaders. Similar to spiritual formation, character has myriad of definitions referring to various constructs and dimensions within the field of character education and formation (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006). Willimon (1983) has defined character as the “basic moral orientation that gives unity, definition, and direction to our lives by forming our habits and intentions into meaningful and predictable patterns that have been determined by our dominant convictions” (p. 28-29). Gula (1996) refers “character to the kind of person who acts in a certain way” (p.33) where it focuses on inner realities of one’s motives, intentions, attitudes, dispositions, and they are seen externally through one’s behaviors. However, these definitions do not allow the constructs to be operationalized. Davidson, Lickona, and Khemelkov (2008) have proposed a definition of character that allows its constructs to be operationalized where they are quantifiable and measurable. They have defined character as “two essential and connected parts: performance character and moral character” (p. 373). When one uses the term character, it consists of two essential interrelated parts which are performance character and moral character.

Performance character refers to a mastery orientation where “it consists of qualities needed to realize one’s potential for excellence in any performance environment” (p. 373). This list of possible qualities for performance character is seen through self-discipline, perseverance, diligence, a positive attitude, not afraid to try and fail, and ingenuity. The list is not exhaustive but serves as a good reference for performance character traits. It is not referring to only one’s natural competency and talents but one’s attitude and resilience in giving one’s best to perform assigned tasks in any situation. Apostle Paul has given the same exhortation to Timothy to give his very best as an approved worker (2 Timothy 2:15) and to discharge his pastoral responsibilities faithfully in the midst of oppositions and challenges (2 Timothy 4:1-5). There are also examples of Old Testament biblical characters who have demonstrated performance character in their lives. Joseph had demonstrated performance character when he gave his very best in serving his Egyptian masters in Potiphar’s house (Genesis 39), in prison for the prison warden (Genesis 40), and in the palace for Pharaoh (Genesis 41). Joseph’s perseverance and diligence coupled with God’s favor brought him the promotion from a slave to the second-in-command in Egypt. King David had developed his performance character when he took care of his father’s sheep and defended them with his life against the attacks of wild animals (1 Samuel 17:34-35). He also gave his very best to defeat Goliath when no one in Israel dared to take on the giant’s daunting and challenge to the nation (1 Samuel 17:48-51).

Moral character refers to a relational orientation where “it consists of qualities needed for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical conduct” (p. 374). This list of possible qualities for moral character is expressed through integrity, justice, care, trustworthiness,



and cooperation. Moral character allows one to treat others with respect and live with ethical integrity where it is concerned with one's relationship with others. The Bible has many examples and instructions that command and exhort one to live a life of ethical integrity in one's relationships with others (Geisler, 2010). The focus of Jesus' Second Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40) and his teaching on the Parable of the Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) further reinforce the importance of one's relationships with others. Joseph also demonstrated a high standard in his moral character through his integrity and trustworthiness when he refused to have an adulterous affair with Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39). Joseph refused to compromise his conduct and insisted on honoring God and his master by fleeing from sexual temptations. King David failed in this regard when he committed adultery against God and Uriah and eventually murdered Uriah on the battlefield (2 Samuel 11). King David dishonored God and Uriah through his adultery with Bathsheba and showed no remorse and integrity when he plotted the death of Uriah. His lack of integrity went against the concept of moral character in his leadership. He had lost the sense of justice and respect for others until prophet Nathan rebuked him where he repented his failures before God (2 Samuel 12).

Therefore, the two essential parts of character are closely related where performance character allows one to do well in one's work, and moral character ensures that one does it ethically. Northouse (2016) has listed five principles of ethical leadership that ethical leaders will demonstrate in leading their organizations. The five principles are respect for others, serve others, honest, just, and to build a community while leading followers to achieve the common goals. All of these principles emphasize the importance of ethical leaders to possess the competence and integrity to use the position of influence to serve others. The interrelatedness of performance and moral character supports the concept of ethical leadership and promotes the importance of giving one's best effort in assigned tasks while having the consideration for the welfare of others. Northouse has also highlighted that the various leadership theories such as transformation leadership, servant leadership, authentic leadership, and spiritual leadership where the strengths of these leadership theories are in their ethical values of raising the moral and performance character of followers. Therefore, the possession of moral and performance character not only enables leaders to lead ethically with integrity, but it also elevates the moral and performance character of followers.

## Conclusion

Emerging ecclesial leaders who desire to finish well in their ministries must possess a good theology of God, experience continuous inner life spiritual formation, and demonstrate a character that performs one's best in ministry in a morally ethical manner. Although the content of the paper presented theology, spiritual formation, and character linearly, these three formational components interact with each other constantly in ecclesial leaders' lives without any of them taking precedence over each

other. Theology forms leaders cognitively and facilitates the understanding of God, doctrines, and values that are essential for Christian living. It empowers leaders with knowledge content to explain the reality of God that affects their daily living. Spiritual formation shapes the inner life of ecclesial leaders and ensures that they have a relationship with God that reinforces their values and identity in God. It empowers leaders with the reality of God in their lives where their ministry is not cognitively driven by theological knowledge but by having a personal relationship with a living God. Character formation shapes the performance and moral character of ecclesial leaders and ensures the cultivation of ethical behaviors when giving their best in work responsibilities. It empowers leaders to lead competently and with integrity over their followers. These three formational components provide the holistic development of ecclesial leaders where they lead with healthy emotional, mental, and spiritual state of being. The constant interactions of theology, spiritual formation, and character within leaders' lives will facilitate the continuous growth in their leadership development and deepen their understanding of God, self, and people. The deepening process will mature and empower leaders to last long and end well in their ministries.

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