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The Impact of Trust on Church Growth in Embu County, Kenya

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Abstract:

Leadership is one of the biggest challenges facing churches operating in the ever-changing and complex 21st-century environment, with authentic leadership playing a critical role in the church's growth. This study sought to assess the impact of Trust on Church Growth in Embu County, Kenya. The specific objective of the study was to establish the impact of trust on church growth. A descriptive survey design and positivism philosophy were adopted in this study. The target population of this study was all congregants of churches in Embu West Sub County. A purposeful sampling technique was employed to obtain the sample. Questionnaires and interview schedules were used in the collection of data. Data analysis utilized both descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics revealed a high score of trust in church leadership (4.18, SD = 0.518). A strong positive correlation was found between church growth and trust ($r = .722$, $p < .01$). Regression analysis showed that trust significantly predicted church growth ($R^2 = .740$, $p < .01$). Conclusions were drawn that trust is indispensable to church growth. The study affirmed trust as a critical component in the leadership framework with implications for church growth. Therefore, church leaders should prioritize building trust within the congregation. Church policymakers should implement and enforce policies that promote trust within the church. Leadership developers should prioritize and recommend the development of leaders who embody trust.

Keywords: Trust, church growth, impact

1. Background of the Study

Many leaders are promising in the beginning, but in the course of time, they reveal their true selves as unauthentic. Jim Jones, a renowned American civil rights preacher and faith healer, was one such leader (Taylor & Johnson, 2022). In 1976, he received the Humanitarian Award of the Year from the Los Angeles Herald paper for his civil rights efforts and many other initiatives. In the same year, he was appointed the chairman of the San Francisco Housing Authority by the Mayor of San Francisco, George Richard Moscone. However, Jim Jones's treatment of his followers was often less than humane (Zaghoudi, 2024). He regularly humiliated, blackmailed and even coerced them into signing off their possessions and homes to the church (Cusack & Lewis, 2020). Eventually, in 1978, the once celebrated and honoured leader led to the murder of 913 people, 276 of whom were children, by urging them to drink poison and nurses injecting it into their mouths (Taylor & Johnson, 2022). The once celebrated and honoured leader and especially for his civil rights efforts, a man who embraced black people and even adopted a black boy, one who would be said to be authentic, in a span of two years had changed to be a mass murder organizer and executioner (Cusack & Lewis, 2020). The ultimate end of Jim Jones was swift. Many peoples' lives were cut short by his acts of barbarism.

Likewise, Bishop Eddie Long, former Senior Pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church who died in 2017, is another classic example of an unauthentic leader. A church minister whose signature messages and sermons were known to revolve around homosexuality stated in part, "God neither created gays nor ordained gay sex," adding that they deserved death for their vile behaviour. He further said that gay men are not real men (Greene-Hayes, 2022). He once travelled to New Zealand to support a church movement seeking the defeat of a civil union that would have extended legal recognition and rights to homosexual couples. Even with all these seemingly anti-gay activities and stunts, it emerged that he had the habit of luring young boys into sexual encounters and, in an effort to cover up, settled some lawsuits out of court (Middleton, 2023). This scenario is a classic example of preaching water but drinking wine and lack of authenticity. The ultimate outcome was the stagnation of a ministry and cause of frustration for many followers who had put their faith and trust in the Bishop and the Ministry.

The line between being an authentic leader and a non-authentic is often blurred by doctrinal compromises among church leaders (Kleynhans et al., 2022). Most of the non-authentic church leaders base their lavish lifestyle on inspiring their followers to pursue God. Their instance of their lavish lifestyle often bewilders many well-meaning Christians (Verhaagen, 2022). Some have defended their need for expensive private jets by saying that they cannot pray on a

commercial plane with other passengers on board because they need to talk to God alone and that they need to sleep without disturbance (Kleynhans et al., 2022). With the above reasons, they justify why they press the church members to give towards enabling them to adopt and sustain such lavish lifestyles. This scenario illustrates a lack of authenticity, as the leader's life is detached from the members they are trying to influence.

A South African pastor once claimed to have resurrected from the dead, a claim which was later revealed to be a hoax (Thinane, 2021), highlighting a troubling trend in some religious contexts (Smith & Denton, 2021). The pastor's outrageous claims, often about miraculous acts, are typically designed to elevate the status of the ministry and attract a large following. These dramatic performances can serve to bolster loyalty among existing congregants and draw in others, particularly those who are desperate for hope or answers to their personal challenges. However, when such acts are exposed as fraudulent, the consequences can be deeply damaging (Coleman et al., 2020). Not only does it undermine the credibility of the ministry, but it also dampens the spirits of the people who may have placed their trust in these supposed miracles. Discovering that their leaders are not genuine can lead to disillusionment and a loss of faith, not only in the leaders themselves but also in the broader spiritual community (Thinane, 2021). This erosion of trust can have long-lasting effects on the faith and morale of the congregation, as they are left grappling with feelings of betrayal and confusion about what they have been led to believe.

In Kenya, there has been a disturbing rise in the number of dangerous Christian cults (Gathara, 2021). The cult leaders often twist the gospel to manipulate their members, often with devastating consequences (Njiru & Mutuma, 2023; Omondi, 2022). They have misled and misguided their followers into doing unimaginable practices like fasting for unreasonable periods of time, giving up all their possessions and property, and resigning from their employment, among others (Kisia, 2023). Recently, a cult-like church linked to pastor Paul Mackenzi left many families broken and desolate after luring many followers through his false teachings, like fasting to death 'to see Jesus', which has led to the death of hundreds of followers buried in the forest. A full-scale government investigation started, which exposed mass graves in the forest land and the collusion of the church with the local leadership to cover up the deaths (Kisia, 2023).

The issue of dangerous preachers in Kenya extends beyond cult-like churches to include charismatic leaders whose behavior often escapes scrutiny, making it difficult for followers to discern the manipulation at play. As Ndegwa (2022) highlights, such pastors often prey on the emotional and financial vulnerabilities of their congregants, presenting themselves as the sole solution to their followers' personal problems. These leaders may appear as authoritative figures who possess divine insight or extraordinary powers, thereby gaining the trust of their congregants, which they then exploit for personal gain (Kamau, 2020). A disturbing example of this type of manipulation in Kenya involved a renowned bishop who convinced a congregant to close her lucrative legal practice, surrender her multimillion-dollar property to the church, and sever ties with her family (Sikolia, 2019). This act of exploitation, fuelled by the bishop's claims of spiritual superiority, led to legal action from the woman's family. They accused the bishop of not only taking advantage of her vulnerability but also unlawfully occupying her property and gaining access to her personal bank accounts, further controlling her life and finances (Gikuyu, 2021).

Authentic leaders are individuals who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others (Farid et al. (2020). They are also conscious of the context in which they operate. They are confident, hopeful, optimistic, and resilient and have high moral character (Wahidi, 2020). In confronting with honesty, one's inner theatre, an individual is then free to discover and express their true self. Authenticity reflects back onto others through increased self-awareness, self-regulation and positive modelling. Authentic leaders can foster the development of authenticity in followers and provide them with a sense of purpose and self-determination. Authentic leadership impacts work engagement and the well-being of subordinates (Gigol, 2020).

Authenticity in leadership promotes subordinates' trust because authentic leaders demonstrate consistency in their actions and beliefs (Baquero, 2023). Wahidi (2020) states that an employee's perception of a leader's authentic behaviour is a strong single predictor of employee job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work happiness. Laguna et al. (2019) found that authentic behaviour exhibited by leaders is positively related to follower job performance. Wahidi (2020) shows that follower's satisfaction with their supervisor, organizational commitments, extra effort, and perceived team effectiveness were outcomes of authentic leadership.

This study has sought to establish the relationship that trust has in influencing church growth in Kenya. Trust, one of the dimensions of authentic leaders, is the extent to which an individual is confident in and willing to act on the words, actions, and decisions of another (Islam et al., 2021). The influence that a leader has on the level of work engagement is subject to the degree of trust that employees have in their leader. Trusting a leader relies on the followers' belief in the leader's honesty and how they treat followers (Islam et al., 2020). A trusting relationship between leaders and their followers forms a psychological contract between the parties and enhances the follower's level of work engagement (Islam et al., 2020).

The growth of organizations is measured using various indicators. According to Ridwan et al. (2020), one of the indicators is organizational commitment, which is the extent to which individuals identify with their organization. Commitment arises when workers behave in a certain way because they want to be regarded and remain in the organization due to its values and goals, even though the values may not be those that the person would adopt (Luthfi et al., 2022). In recent years, church leaders have had problems motivating members to identify and participate in church, leading to stunted church growth (Dunaetz & Bocock, 2020). The number of profits an organization can generate or receive is also an indicator of growth. Organizations intent on making the owner or owners rich are considered 'for-profits'. A non-profit organization is a tax-exempt organization formed for the purpose of serving the public interest, which may fall into categories such as charitable, educational, scientific, literary, or religious (Luthfi et al., 2022). The growth of Non-profit organizations, in our

case, churches, can also be measured by the resources they can wield to sustain their missions and objectives. According to Ridwan et al. (2020), churches' source of income is offerings from church members.

Churches, as non-profit making organizations, are formed with the intention of providing some spiritual nourishment without the promise of monetary rewards like a private business enterprise (Johnson, 2023). As they evangelize to the nations, churches must also acknowledge the people's needs and try to meet them (Benyah, 2021). Providing such services by the churches also helps in solving the basic needs of congregants. These social services include schools, clinics, access to water and many others (Benyah, 2021). Church growth is visible when there is increased capacity to meet the needs of more people in the community it is in (Benyah, 2021).

Organizations grow and become efficient in operation by adopting and pursuing best practices in improving competency among their workers. This encompasses knowledge, expertise, skills, personal and behavioural characteristics, beliefs, motives, and values. Competency is the ability to apply knowledge, understanding, and skills in performing to the standards required in employment (Škrinjarić, 2022). For leadership to be effective, competence represents an attempt to capture the experience, lessons learned and knowledge of seasoned leaders to provide a guiding framework for the benefit of others and the organization (Mwaura et al., 2019).

1.1 Problem Statement

In the 1990s, the church leadership in Kenya advocated for change by holding the government of the day accountable for various issues, such as corruption and ethnic clashes (Taurus, 2022). The church leadership spoke in one voice. However, since the early 2000s, the church's concerted role as an agent of transformation began to erode, with religious leaders divided along ethnic and political lines (Taurus, 2022). Faith leaders and religious institutions were, for a long time, held to high standards of morals and ethics, with the assumption that they operate from principles (Ortiz-Gómez et al., 2020).

Church growth is a critical indicator of the success and influence of religious institutions (Nga'nga, 2023), particularly in areas such as Embu County, Kenya. However, many churches in the region face challenges in achieving sustainable growth due to various leadership-related factors (Wambua, 2021). While some churches have experienced growth, others struggle with stagnation or decline, often due to issues surrounding leadership authenticity, which includes trustworthiness, transparency, ethical behavior, and servant leadership qualities (Mwachiro & Kinyua, 2022). Despite the increasing recognition of authentic leadership in organizational success (Smith et al., 2020), there is limited empirical evidence on how authentic leadership factors specifically affect church growth in the context of Embu County. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the effect of authentic leadership factors on the growth of churches in Embu County, Kenya. By exploring how factors such as ethical conduct, transparency, and trustworthiness influence church growth, the study aims to provide valuable insights into how church leaders can enhance their leadership practices to foster healthier, more sustainable church communities (Njoroge & Ochieng, 2024).

Ng'ang'a (2023) investigated the role of people in the church's numerical growth. The cross-sectional study design was conducted in Kenya, and PCEA was used as a case study. A total of 218 study participants were recruited for the study. The study established church leadership plays a huge role in encouraging church growth. The study additionally established the collaboration between the membership of the church and church leadership, which helped sustain and encourage congregational growth. The study, however, focused on the role of various church stakeholders on church growth, meaning the study did not concentrate on the role of church leadership on church growth. The study also focused on PCEA only, signalling the findings may not apply to other churches. The study was also guided by the cross-sectional study design, signalling limitations in methodology.

Murugi (2023) investigated the growth of PCEA from the lens of their Jitegemea philosophy. The descriptive study design was conducted in Kenya and involved 84 church leaders. Jitegemea philosophy is a rallying call for members to pull their resources together to improve self-reliance. The study established the philosophy that helped the churches improve their financial sustainability and congregation growth. Although the findings showed the positive impact of Jitegemea on church growth, the study was limited in scope as it focused solely on church leaders and did not measure the impact of any particular leadership model. Furthermore, the emphasis on Jitegemea's effectiveness restricts the study's applicability to other churches that do not operate under a similar self-reliance philosophy, highlighting the need for further research that explores diverse leadership models across different church contexts.

1.2. Specific Objective

The specific objective of this study was to establish the impact of trust on church growth in Embu County, Kenya.

1.3. Research Question

The study sought to answer the question: How does trust in church leadership impact church growth in Embu County, Kenya?

1.4. Conceptual Framework

Trust is conceptualized to have a direct linear relationship with church growth, as represented by the diagrammatic illustration below.

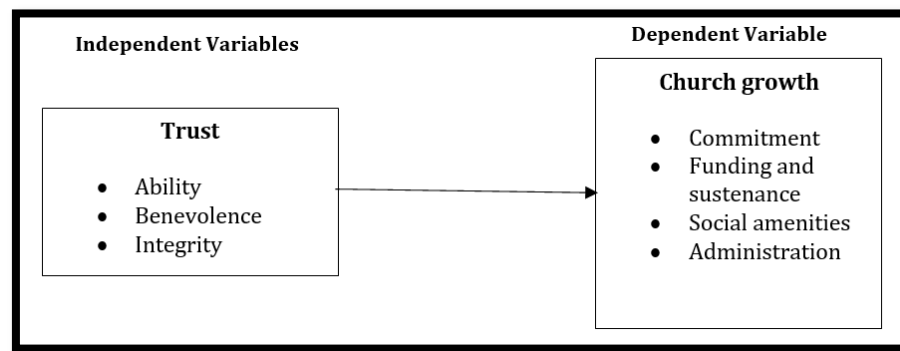


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2. Methodology

This study was anchored in the positivism paradigm and a descriptive survey design in seeking to establish how authentic leadership impacts church growth in Embu County. The target population was the church members and leaders of churches of different denominations in Embu County, Manyatta Sub County, Kirimari and Mbeti North Wards. The churches are Deliverance Churches, Restoration End time Churches, Triumph Churches, FGCK Embu, Winners Chapel and Great Gospel Visioners (GGV). Thirty-five Pentecostal churches were selected in Embu County for this study. A purposeful sampling technique was used to select those subjects that satisfy the objectives of the study based on the researcher's conviction. Primary and secondary data were collected using questionnaires and interview schedules. The reliability of the data-collecting instrument was ensured by conducting a pilot test on a sample that did not constitute the final sample. The reliability results are as in the table below:

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Trust	.682	8

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

The trust had a Cronbach's alpha of .682 based on 8 items. The reliability score was below 0.7. However, an examination of Item-Total Statistics revealed that deletion of the item "I think it is important to watch the leadership closely so that it does not take advantage of people like me" would increase the Cronbach's alpha to .833. Thus, the item was deleted. Diagnostic tests were done to ensure the results and inferences were exaggerated. The tests conducted included a normality test, multi-collinearity test, heteroscedasticity test, linearity test, and outlier test. Data was analyzed using the SPSS Version 26 computer program for completeness and consistency. The function for the inferential statistics is shown below:

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

Where:

CG = Church Growth (Dependent Variable)

TR = Trust (Independent Variable)

TA = Transparency and Accountability (Independent Variable)

VL = Visionary Leadership (Independent Variable)

TW = Teamwork (Independent Variable)

β_0 = Intercept

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

ϵ = Error term

PC = Personal Characteristics (Moderator Variable)

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

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Response Rate and Demographic Analysis

3.1.1. Response Rate

Response rate indicates the level of engagement and participation of the target population, ensuring the data collected is representative and reliable. The response rate is presented in table 2.

Respondents' Category	Frequency	Percent
Responded	323	83%
Did not respond	64	17%
Total	387	100%

Table 2: Response Rate

Table 2 shows that a high response rate of 83% was obtained. This high response rate suggests strong engagement from the target population, which enhances the reliability of the conclusions drawn from the findings, as the data is likely to be representative of the broader group being studied. This is in accordance with Saunders et al. (2019), who posit that any response rate in excess of 70% is excellent for analysis. This compares favorably with a similar study in Embu County by Njiru and Warue (2019), whose investigation of factors affecting the numeric growth of Pentecostal churches in the county yielded a response rate of 73%.

3.1.2. Age of Respondents

The age distribution of respondents is useful for identifying generational perspectives and preferences, which may influence how authentic leadership impacts church growth. Understanding age demographics also aids in tailoring leadership approaches to meet the unique needs of different age groups within the church community. The age distribution of respondents is presented in table 3.

Age Bracket	Frequency	Percent
18-29 years	110	34.1%
30-39 years	98	30.3%
40-49 years	68	21.1%
50 years and above	47	14.6%
Total	323	100.0%

Table 3: Respondents' Age Bracket

The table shows that 34.1% of respondents were in the age group of between 18-29 years, 30.3% were aged 30-39 years, 21.1% were aged 40-49 years, and 14.6% were 50 years and above. These percentages represent the valid distribution of the sample, totaling 100% (n = 323). The age distribution indicates that the majority of respondents were relatively young, with a combined 64.4% of participants falling between the ages of 18 and 39 years, suggesting a youthful membership of the church in Embu County. This finding is consistent with demographic trends in a previous church growth study in Kenya by Wairimu (2023), implying that churches in Kenya are populated by a relatively youthful generation. The implication of this is that church leaders may be under pressure to demonstrate authentic leadership as this generational cohort is known to demand authenticity from leaders (Thomas, 2021).

3.1.3. Gender of Respondents

Data on gender help identify whether leadership approaches resonate differently with men and women, enabling tailored strategies to foster inclusivity and growth within the church. The gender distribution of respondents in the study on authentic leadership factors and church growth in Embu County, Kenya, is presented in table 4.

Gender Category	Frequency	Percent
Male	162	50.2%
Female	161	49.8%
Total	323	100.0%

Table 4: Gender of Respondents

The table shows that 50.2% of respondents were male and 49.8% were female. This nearly equal distribution of male and female respondents is somewhat consistent with a study by Mumbi (2023) on the success of churches in Nairobi County, which put the distribution of female respondents at 50% against males at 45%, with 5% representing missing data. This suggests a relatively balanced representation of both genders in the study, reflecting an inclusive perspective on the factors influencing church growth and authentic leadership in the study region.

3.1.4. Level of Education

Data on the level of education helps to understand how educational attainment influences perceptions of authentic leadership and its impact on church growth. Education levels may affect respondents' leadership expectations, communication preferences, and engagement with church activities, providing insights for more effective leadership strategies. The level of education distribution of respondents is presented in table 5.

Level of Education	Frequency	Percent
Other	18	5.6%
High School	25	7.7%
Diploma	131	40.6%
Degree	119	36.8%
Postgraduate	30	9.3%
Total	323	100.0%

Table 5: Distribution of Respondents by Level of Education

The table shows that the highest distribution of respondents held a diploma (40.6%), followed by those with a degree (36.8%) and post-graduate qualifications (9.3%). Additionally, 7.7% had completed high school, while 5.6% had other forms of education. The data indicates that the majority (77.4%) had at least a diploma, suggesting that the majority of the respondents had higher levels of education, which may influence their perspectives on leadership and church growth. The finding is in line with the study by Mumbi (2023), which found that the majority of the respondents attained high levels of education ranging from diploma to post-graduate levels.

3.1.5. Period of Membership

Years of church membership provide insights into the respondents' level of experience, commitment, and familiarity with church activities and leadership. The distribution of respondents is presented in table 6.

Years of Church Membership	Frequency	Percent
Under 5 years	107	33.1%
5-10 years	85	26.3%
Above 10 years	131	40.6%
Total	323	100.0%

Table 6: Distribution of Respondents by Period of Members

The table shows that 33.1% of respondents had been members for under 5 years, 26.3% had been members for 5-10 years, and 40.6% had been members for over 10 years. The data indicates that a significant portion of respondents (40.6%) had been church members for over 10 years, suggesting a relatively experienced group of participants, which may provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of authentic leadership on church growth. This is in line with the notion advanced by Cummings et al. (2021) that experience is a needed condition for leadership development.

3.1.6. Level of Income

Respondents were asked to disclose their income levels because income levels may affect people's ability to contribute to church activities, their expectations of church leadership, and their engagement with church initiatives. The income distribution of respondents is presented in table 7.

Income Level	Frequency	Percent
Below Ksh 25,000	122	37.8%
Ksh 25,000-50,000	119	36.8%
Ksh 51,000-100,000	55	17.0%
Above Ksh 100,000	27	8.4%
Total	323	100.0%

Table 7: Distribution of Respondents by Income Level

The table shows that 37.8% of respondents earned below Ksh 25,000, 36.8% earned between Ksh 25,000 and Ksh 50,000, 17.0% earned between Ksh 51,000 and Ksh 100,000, and 8.4% earned above Ksh 100,000, with the total sample comprising 323 respondents. The data indicates that a majority of respondents (74.6%) earned below Ksh 50,000, suggesting that the study predominantly included individuals from lower to middle-income brackets. This agrees with the research by Onyango (2019) that categorizes Kenya as a low to middle-income country. This suggests that respondents are likely to be sensitive to matters concerning their finances, which may affect church growth.

3.1.6.1. Disability Status

Data on disability status is relevant as it ensures the study captures the perspectives and experiences of individuals with disabilities, highlighting any unique challenges or needs they may have in relation to church leadership and growth. The distribution of respondents by disability status is presented in table 8.

Response category	Frequency	Percent
No	318	98.5%
Yes	5	1.5%
Total	323	100.0%

Table 8: Disability Status

The table shows that 98.5% of respondents reported no disability, while 1.5% reported having a disability, with the total sample comprising 323 respondents. This indicates that the vast majority of respondents did not identify as having a disability. This reflects the broader demographic trends in Kenya. According to a status report on disability inclusion in Kenya, about 2.2% of the population constitutes persons with disability (State Department for Social Protection, 2021).

3.1.7. Respondents' Role in Church

Data on respondents' roles in the church is relevant because it provides insights into how different positions or responsibilities influence perceptions of authentic leadership and its impact on church growth. How respondents were distributed by their role in the church is shown in table 9.

Role in Church	Frequency	Percent
Ordinary Member	148	45.8%
Leader	175	54.2%
Total	323	100.0%

Table 9: Respondents' Role in Church

The table shows that 45.8% of respondents were ordinary members, while 54.2% held leadership roles. This indicates that a majority of respondents (54.2%) were leaders within their churches, suggesting that the study predominantly engaged individuals in positions of influence, which may provide valuable insights into the relationship between authentic leadership and church growth. The most salient theme emerging from in-depth interviews with pastors and overseers is spiritual leadership and guidance, which encompasses teaching, preaching, and overseeing the spiritual and administrative welfare of the congregation. A majority of respondents emphasized responsibilities such as "teaching the word" and "preaching", reflecting a focus on spiritual nourishment and dissemination of gospel truths. Additionally, tasks like "leading the church" and "overseeing the congregation" highlight the dual roles of pastoral leadership in both spiritual and organizational domains. Sub-themes such as "training disciples," "evangelism," and "unifying people" underscore a broader mandate to foster spiritual growth and community cohesion. This analysis reveals that the core responsibility of the leaders lies in guiding their congregations through teaching, leading by example, and fulfilling administrative duties to achieve the church's vision.

3.2. Descriptive Analysis

This section presents statistics generated for each item. These statistics provide insights into how respondents answered each item for each variable on a 5-point scale.

3.2.1. Descriptive Statistics for Trust Items

The descriptive statistics for the trust items in the study on the impact of the trust dimension of authentic leadership on church growth are presented in table 10. Respondents rated trust items on a 5-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Trust Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Sound principles seem to guide the church leadership when making decisions	4.33	.639
Church Leadership can be relied on to keep its promises	4.32	.700
Church leadership has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do	4.29	.671
The leadership has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do	4.28	.648
Church leadership treats people like me fairly and justly	4.15	.691
Whenever the church leadership makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me	4.11	.797
I am very willing to let the church leadership make decisions for people like me	3.80	.937
Trust composite mean score	4.18	.518

Table 10: Descriptive Statistics for Trust Items

The item assessing whether sound principles guide the church leadership in decision-making had a mean score of 4.33 with a standard deviation of 0.639. This suggests that respondents largely agree that the church leadership operates based on strong ethical principles, which likely foster trust and confidence in the leadership, contributing to positive perceptions and potential church growth. This finding aligns with Zheng et al. (2022), who found that integrity and ethical

principles enhance organizational alignment and team performance. It suggests that authentic leadership practice in the church fosters a strong ethical foundation, promoting trust and organizational stability.

Another item measuring the reliability of the church leadership in keeping promises had a mean score of 4.32 (SD = 0.700). This indicates that respondents generally trust the leadership to fulfil its commitments, a factor that is crucial in building long-term relationships with the church members and supporting the church's growth and success. This finding agrees with Mahdi and Nassar (2021), who emphasized the role of strong relationships and trust in mitigating risks and fostering organizational sustainability. It highlights that authentic leadership practice in the church must prioritize reliability to sustain growth and trust.

Respondents also agreed that the leadership is capable of achieving what it sets out to do, as reflected by the mean score of 4.29 (SD = 0.671) for the item assessing the leadership's ability to deliver on its promises. This suggests that the church leadership is perceived as competent, which can inspire greater involvement and engagement among church members, thereby contributing to church growth. This finding is consistent with Heyns and Rothmann (2021), who demonstrated that trust in leaders' competence enhances engagement and satisfaction. It underscores that authentic leadership in the church should prioritize delivering on promises to maintain member confidence.

The item about the leadership's ability to accomplish its goals received a mean score of 4.28 (SD = 0.648). Although slightly lower than the previous item, it still indicates strong agreement, reinforcing the perception of church leadership as competent and capable. This trust in the leadership's ability to follow through on its plans likely encourages active participation and support from the congregation. The finding aligns with Kipkosgei et al. (2020), who found that trust in leadership facilitates organizational growth through effective goal achievement. It highlights that authentic leadership practice should focus on demonstrating the capability to sustain church growth.

When evaluating whether church leadership treats people fairly and justly, the mean score was 4.15 (SD = 0.691), indicating that respondents agree that they are treated with fairness and justice. Such perceptions are fundamental in building trust and a sense of belonging among church members, which can positively influence retention and growth within the church community. This is consistent with Mashilo and Kubayi (2024), who showed that fairness in decision-making enhances trust in leadership. It suggests that authentic leadership practice must emphasize fairness to build cohesive and trusting church communities.

For the item concerning the leadership's concern for the welfare of its members when making important decisions, the mean score was 4.11 (SD = 0.797). This indicates that while there is strong agreement that the leadership considers the interests of the congregation, there is some variability in responses, suggesting that a small proportion of respondents may feel that their concerns are not always fully addressed. This finding agrees with Murage (2022), who emphasized that addressing individual needs fosters loyalty and enhances outcomes. It underscores that authentic leadership practice in the church should enhance inclusivity by prioritizing members' welfare in decision-making processes.

The item on willingness to let the church leadership make decisions for its members had the lowest mean score of 3.80 (SD = 0.937), indicating a lower level of agreement compared to the other trust items. This suggests that while many respondents are open to allowing leadership to make decisions on their behalf, there is a noticeable hesitation, implying a desire for more involvement in decision-making processes. This finding differs from Chaudhary et al. (2021), who highlighted the importance of transparency and shared decision-making in fostering trust. It suggests that authentic leadership in the church should balance decision-making authority with participatory approaches to build greater trust and acceptance.

Finally, the composite mean score for trust was 4.18 (SD = 0.518), reflecting an overall high level of trust in the church leadership. This suggests that, on average, respondents perceive the leadership as trustworthy, reliable, and competent – qualities that are essential for fostering positive relationships within the congregation and promoting church growth. This finding supports Heyns and Rothmann (2021), who showed that trust leads to greater engagement and satisfaction. This implies that authentic leadership in the church must consistently demonstrate trustworthiness to sustain positive growth trajectories.

3.2.2. Descriptive Statistics for Commitment Items

The descriptive statistics for the commitment items are presented in table 11. Respondents rated these items on a 5-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Commitment Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
I am proud to tell others that I am part of this church	4.65	.653
I would recommend this organization to my friends as a great church to be part of	4.59	.605
I get a feeling of accomplishment from participating in the church activities	4.41	.692
I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond what is normally expected in order to help the church to be successful	4.32	.760
I find that my values and the church values are very similar	4.30	.679
I understand and are aware of how my input contributes to the church mission and vision	4.26	.748
My commitment to this church goes beyond my present circumstances	4.11	.839
I would accept almost any type of assignment in order to keep giving back to this church	4.05	.909
Commitment composite mean score	4.33	.544

Table 11: Descriptive Statistics for Commitment Items

The item assessing pride in being part of the church had a mean score of 4.65 (SD = 0.653), indicating that respondents strongly identify with and take pride in their membership. This suggests that church members are highly committed and feel a strong sense of belonging, which is a key factor in fostering church growth, as it contributes to member retention and engagement. This finding agrees with Wahidi (2020), who noted that authenticity in leadership fosters trust and commitment. The strong sense of belonging observed here is essential for sustaining church growth through consistent member engagement.

For the item recommending the church to others as a great place to be part of, the mean score was 4.59 (SD = 0.605). This suggests that respondents would eagerly endorse the church to others, reflecting high levels of satisfaction and commitment. This type of advocacy is crucial for attracting new members, thus supporting the growth of the church community. This result aligns with Laguna et al. (2019), who found that authentic leadership is positively related to organizational citizenship behavior, such as promoting the organization to others. This advocacy is pivotal for enhancing the church's visibility and expanding its membership base.

Respondents also expressed a sense of accomplishment from participating in church activities, with a mean score of 4.41 (SD = 0.692). This indicates that members find personal fulfilment in their involvement, which enhances long-term commitment and further supports church growth, as individuals are more likely to remain engaged when they feel their contributions are meaningful. This finding is consistent with Duarte et al. (2021), who observed that authentic leadership promotes affective commitment, which in turn enhances organizational performance. A sense of accomplishment fosters engagement, strengthening the foundation for sustained growth.

The item on willingness to exert extra effort to ensure the church's success had a mean score of 4.32 (SD = 0.760), reflecting that respondents are willing to go above and beyond expectations to help the church succeed. This strong level of dedication is essential for fostering a culture of excellence, which is critical for the church's growth and ongoing success. *This finding agrees with Leal et al. (2021), who highlighted that authentic leadership encourages extra effort among followers. The willingness to exert additional effort directly translates into greater collective progress and enhanced church growth.*

For the item assessing the alignment of personal and church values, the mean score was 4.30 (SD = 0.679), suggesting that respondents feel a significant alignment between their values and those of the church. This shared sense of purpose strengthens commitment, which in turn supports the church's growth by ensuring members are invested in its mission. This aligns with Baquero (2023), who observed that authentic leadership strengthens alignment between organizational and individual values, enhancing trust and commitment. A shared vision fosters a unified effort towards church growth.

The item regarding awareness of how individual input contributes to the church's mission and vision had a mean score of 4.26 (SD = 0.748). This indicates that respondents understand the importance of their contributions and feel connected to the church's larger objectives. This clarity and sense of purpose reinforce commitment, which is vital for sustained church growth. This result is consistent with Gigol (2020), who found that authentic leaders enhance followers' sense of purpose and self-determination. Clear alignment with the church's mission ensures collective progress towards growth objectives.

The item on commitment beyond current circumstances had a mean score of 4.11 (SD = 0.839), suggesting that respondents are committed to the church even in the face of changing personal circumstances. This enduring commitment is a key factor in ensuring long-term church growth, as members who are steadfast in their loyalty help stabilize and strengthen the congregation. This agrees with Leal et al. (2021), who demonstrated that authentic leadership fosters resilience and long-term commitment. Such unwavering dedication is a cornerstone for sustainable growth.

The item on willingness to accept almost any assignment to continue giving back to the church had a mean score of 4.05 (SD = 0.909). Although the score is still relatively high, the greater variability suggests that while many members are highly committed, there may be some individuals who are less inclined to take on additional responsibilities. Ensuring that all members feel empowered to contribute will help maximize their involvement and foster growth. This finding aligns with Duarte et al. (2021), who noted that authentic leadership promotes work role performance, although variability suggests a need for tailored approaches to engagement. A higher willingness to accept roles can help unlock latent potential for growth.

Finally, the composite mean score for commitment was 4.33 (SD = 0.544), reflecting a generally high level of commitment among respondents. This strong commitment indicates that the church has successfully fostered a loyal and engaged membership, which is essential for sustained growth and development. *This result is in line with Wahidi (2020), who observed that authentic leadership fosters organizational commitment and satisfaction. The strong composite score underscores a solid foundation for continuous church growth.*

3.2.3. Descriptive Statistics for Funding and Sustainability Items

The descriptive statistics for the funding and sustainability items, which are key indicators of the church's capacity for sustained growth, are presented in table 12. Respondents rated these items on a 5-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Funding of projects and programs in the church is done out of free will and without any undue coercion	4.45	.747
I feel confident supporting a long-term project or program in the church.	4.37	.708
Church Programs and projects align with church mission and vision	4.36	.651
I feel confident that finances raised for projects and programs are prudently used	4.31	.742
I am confident that the church has the capacity to sustain the set church programs and projects	4.28	.664
I am confident that church programs and projects are effectively achieving their intended outcomes	4.27	.692
Finances raised for the projects and programs are specifically used for the intended purpose and not diverted to other projects	4.26	.787
Funding and Sustainance composite mean score	4.33	.572

Table 12: Descriptive Statistics for Funding and Sustainability Items

The item assessing the voluntary nature of funding for church projects had a mean score of 4.45 (SD = 0.747), indicating that respondents feel that contributions to church programs are made freely and without pressure. This sense of autonomy in funding suggests a positive attitude toward church initiatives, which is crucial for long-term financial sustainability and the growth of church programs. This finding agrees with Nga'nga (2023) and Wambua (2021), who emphasize the importance of voluntary contributions and financial sustainability for the growth of churches. It highlights that when congregants feel no pressure to give, it can foster long-term engagement and growth.

For the item on confidence in supporting long-term projects, the mean score was 4.37 (SD = 0.708). This suggests that respondents feel assured in their ability to contribute to ongoing church projects, indicating a stable level of confidence in the church's initiatives. A strong sense of confidence in supporting long-term projects is vital for ensuring that the church can maintain and expand its activities over time. This finding is consistent with the perspectives of Mwachiro and Kinyua (2022) that confidence in the church's financial management and projects contributes to sustainable growth. It suggests that church members' confidence in their church's initiatives is essential for long-term growth.

Respondents also expressed that church programs and projects align with the church's mission and vision, with a mean score of 4.36 (SD = 0.651). This alignment is important as it ensures that resources are being allocated effectively toward initiatives that support the overall goals of the church, thus fostering both sustainability and growth. This finding aligns with Njoroge and Ochieng (2024), who stress the importance of aligning church programs with the church's mission for effective resource management and growth. It shows that alignment with mission and vision is a key factor in achieving sustainable growth.

The item on the prudent use of finances for church projects had a mean score of 4.31 (SD = 0.742), suggesting that respondents have a strong level of trust in how the church manages the funds raised. Effective financial management is essential for the sustainability of church programs, as it ensures that resources are utilized efficiently to achieve the desired outcomes. This finding is consistent with Mwachiro and Kinyua (2022), who emphasize the importance of transparency and ethical financial management for church growth. It underscores the critical role that prudent financial stewardship plays in supporting church growth and sustainability.

For the item assessing the church's capacity to sustain its programs, the mean score was 4.28 (SD = 0.664). This suggests that respondents are confident in the church's ability to maintain its programs and projects over time, a critical factor for ensuring that growth is not just achieved, but also sustained. This finding aligns with the viewpoint of Murugi (2023), which highlights the importance of sustainability in church growth. It demonstrates that confidence in a church's ability to sustain its programs is crucial for long-term success and growth.

The item on the effectiveness of church programs in achieving their intended outcomes had a mean score of 4.27 (SD = 0.692). This indicates that respondents are confident in the church's ability to deliver successful programs, which is vital for maintaining community support and continued participation. This finding agrees with Ng'ang'a (2023), who emphasizes that effective programs are essential for maintaining congregation support and ensuring long-term growth. It suggests that the church's ability to deliver impactful programs is a key driver of its growth.

The item assessing the proper allocation of funds for church projects had a mean score of 4.26 (SD = 0.787), reflecting respondents' confidence that finances are used for their intended purposes. This trust in financial stewardship is critical for sustaining long-term funding and encouraging continued support from the congregation. This finding is in line with Chimakati and Oduol (2023), who underscore the importance of ethical leadership and financial management in sustaining church programs and fostering growth. It highlights that effective financial stewardship supports long-term sustainability and growth.

The composite mean score for funding and sustainability was 4.33 (SD = 0.572), reflecting a strong level of confidence in the church's funding practices and sustainability. This suggests that respondents believe the church is effectively managing its resources to support long-term growth and success. The finding agrees with the literature, which

stresses that financial sustainability is crucial for church growth (Nga'nga, 2023; Murugi, 2023). It indicates that confidence in the church's funding practices is a key factor for its continued growth and success.

3.2.4. Descriptive Statistics for Social Amenities Items

The descriptive statistics for the social amenities items, which contribute to the overall development and well-being of the church community, are presented in table 13. Respondents rated these items on a 5-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Social Amenities Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
The church has established social amenities for members and the society	4.15	.814
The church social amenities are more beneficial to the members/society than being income generating projects	4.10	.850
The established social amenities are specifically used for the intended purpose	4.15	.785
The church is visionary with respect to establishment of social amenities	4.24	.653
I am satisfied with the extent of social amenities establishment done by the church.	3.97	.888
Members participate in decision making on the prioritization of amenities to be established in the church	3.70	1.009
I am confident in the leadership ability to sustain and improve on existing social amenities	4.15	.733
Social Amenities composite mean score	4.06	.669

Table 13: Descriptive Statistics for Social Amenities Items

The item assessing the establishment of social amenities for members and society had a mean score of 4.15 (SD = 0.814), suggesting that respondents generally agree that the church has established meaningful social amenities. This indicates a positive view of the church's role in addressing the social needs of both members and the broader community, which can foster a sense of community engagement and support. This finding is consistent with the literature by Benyah (2021) and Johnson (2023), which highlights the importance of churches prioritizing social responsibility over financial gain to foster positive community relationships and support. It shows that churches that focus on the well-being of their members and community are likely to see growth through strengthened social bonds. This finding is aligned with Mutua (2022), who stresses that the effective use of resources is essential for churches to maintain trust and long-term sustainability. It indicates that churches that manage their resources effectively and transparently are more likely to achieve sustainable growth.

For the item regarding the benefits of social amenities being more focused on the members and society than generating income, the mean score was 4.10 (SD = 0.850). This reflects respondents' belief that the church prioritizes the well-being of its members and society over financial gain, which can contribute to positive perceptions of the church's values and its social responsibility, strengthening community bonds. This finding agrees with Kamau (2022), who highlights the importance of churches having a vision that aligns with community development and long-term growth. It indicates that churches with a strong, visionary approach to social amenities are likely to experience growth as they contribute to community development.

The item on whether the established social amenities are specifically used for their intended purpose had a mean score of 4.15 (SD = 0.785), suggesting that respondents trust the church to ensure that these amenities are being used effectively for their designated goals. This confidence in the proper use of resources is important for maintaining trust and ensuring the long-term sustainability of these initiatives. This finding is consistent with the perspectives of Benyah (2021), who suggests that churches need to meet the evolving needs of their communities to foster growth. It suggests that the church has made strides in establishing social amenities, albeit with room for improvement, to fully meet members' expectations and enhance engagement.

For the item regarding the church's vision with respect to the establishment of social amenities, the mean score was 4.24 (SD = 0.653). This suggests that respondents perceive the church as having a forward-thinking approach in providing social amenities, aligning with the church's long-term objectives and contributing to the development of the community. This finding is in line with the literature, which suggests that involvement in decision-making can improve community engagement and performance (Goddles & Amaluwa, 2022). It implies that increasing member involvement in decision-making could enhance engagement and support for church initiatives, contributing to church growth.

The item assessing satisfaction with the extent of social amenities established by the church had a mean score of 3.97 (SD = 0.888). While this is still relatively high, the variation in responses suggests that some respondents may feel that more could be done in terms of the church's social infrastructure. Addressing this variance could help improve overall satisfaction and engagement.

Regarding participation in decision-making for the prioritization of social amenities, the mean score was 3.70 (SD = 1.009). This indicates a moderate agreement, suggesting that not all respondents feel involved in the decision-making process for social amenities. Increasing member participation in such decisions could enhance their sense of ownership and commitment to these initiatives. This finding affirms the viewpoint of Godbles and Amaluwa (2022) that involvement in decision-making can improve community engagement and performance. It implies that increasing member involvement in decision-making could enhance engagement and support for church initiatives, contributing to church growth.

The item on confidence in the leadership's ability to sustain and improve existing social amenities had a mean score of 4.15 (SD = 0.733), reflecting respondents' confidence in the leadership's capacity to maintain and enhance the church's social infrastructure. This sense of trust in the leadership is crucial for sustaining ongoing projects and ensuring their continued success. This finding agrees with Obuba (2023), who emphasizes the importance of leadership trust and competence in sustaining church initiatives and ensuring long-term success. It suggests that confidence in leadership is a key factor for sustaining and improving social amenities, thereby contributing to the growth of the church.

The composite mean score for social amenities was 4.06 (SD = 0.669), indicating a generally positive perception of the church's efforts in establishing and maintaining social amenities. While respondents are generally satisfied, there may still be room for improvement, particularly in enhancing member involvement and addressing varying levels of satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the literature, which emphasizes the importance of addressing both the community's needs and leadership transparency for church growth (Mutua, 2022; Godbles & Amaluwa, 2022). It suggests that by improving satisfaction and involvement, the church can enhance its social impact, which in turn will support its growth and development.

3.3. Diagnostic Tests

This section presents the results of diagnostic tests to assess whether the underlying assumptions of regression analysis were met. The diagnostic tests performed include linearity, multi-collinearity, homoscedasticity, normality, and outlier tests.

3.3.1. Linearity Test

The **linearity test** ensures that the relationship between the independent variables (such as trust, transparency, visionary leadership, and teamwork) and the dependent variable (church growth) is linear (Djaballah-Djedbour & Tazerouti, 2022). A linear relationship is crucial because regression analysis assumes that changes in the dependent variable are proportionate to changes in the independent variables (Pardoe, 2020). This was checked by plotting scatter plots of the independent variables against the dependent variable. A linear relationship depicts a straight-line pattern. A visual inspection of the scatterplots indicated that the assumption of linearity of the datasets was met. The scatterplots are presented in figures 2 to 5.

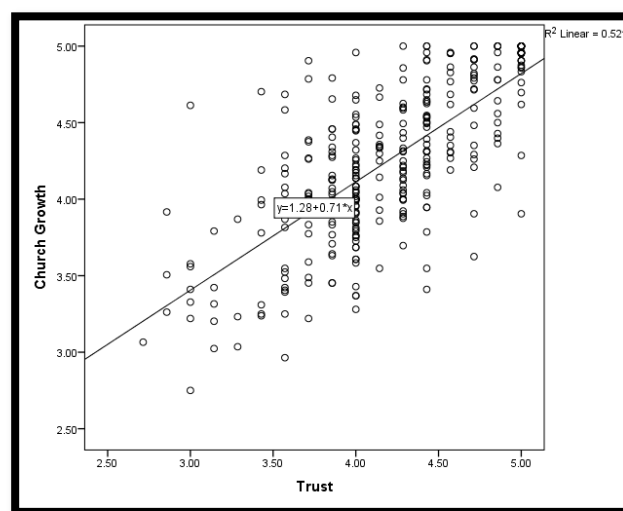


Figure 2: Trust and Church Growth Scatterplot

3.3.2. Multi-collinearity Test

Multi-collinearity test checks whether any of the independent variables are highly correlated with each other, which could distort the regression results (Theofani & Sediyo, 2022). If multi-collinearity is present, it may inflate standard errors and make it difficult to interpret the individual effects of predictors (Lindner et al., 2020). This was assessed by calculating the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) for each independent variable. A VIF value above 10 suggests problematic multi-collinearity, signalling the need for the removal or combination of certain variables (Harefa et al., 2023). A multi-collinearity analysis was conducted to assess the degree of correlation among the independent variables (Trust, Transparency and Accountability, Visionary Leadership, and Teamwork) in predicting Church Growth. Table 14 presents the output.

Coefficients ^a			
Model		Collinearity Statistics	
		Tolerance	VIF
1	Trust	.479	2.087

Table 14: Multi-collinearity Test

a. Dependent Variable: Church Growth

The tolerance value was .479, and the variance inflation factor (VIF) value was 2.087. The VIF value was below the commonly accepted threshold of 10, suggesting no significant multi-collinearity concerns. This means that the assumption of no multi-collinearity was met.

3.3.3. Normality Test

The normality test checks whether the datasets are normally distributed as a requirement of regression analysis. For this purpose, the Shapiro-Wilk test was performed, where a significant result ($p < 0.05$) indicates that the residuals deviate from normality (Knief & Forstmeier, 2021). Table 15 presents the output.

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Trust	.107	323	.000	.963	323	.000
Commitment	.112	323	.000	.920	323	.000
Funding and Sustenance	.142	323	.000	.906	323	.000
Social Amenities	.094	323	.000	.944	323	.000
Church Growth	.068	323	.001	.967	323	.000

Table 15: Tests of Normality

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality indicated significant deviations from normality for all variables ($p < .001$), suggesting that none of the variables followed a normal distribution. This violation of the normality assumption was addressed through log transformation to stabilize variance, reduce the impact of extreme values, and make the distribution closer to normal (Noel et al., 2020).

3.3.4. Homoscedasticity Test

The **homoscedasticity test** ensures that the variance of residuals is constant across all levels of the independent variables. (Purba & Kusman, 2020). If heteroscedasticity (unequal variance) exists, the regression estimates can become inefficient, and statistical tests may become invalid. A scatterplot of standardized residuals against standardized predicted values was visually inspected to assess the assumption of homoscedasticity for the relationship between servant leadership and church growth (Alita et al., 2020). The output is presented in figure 3.

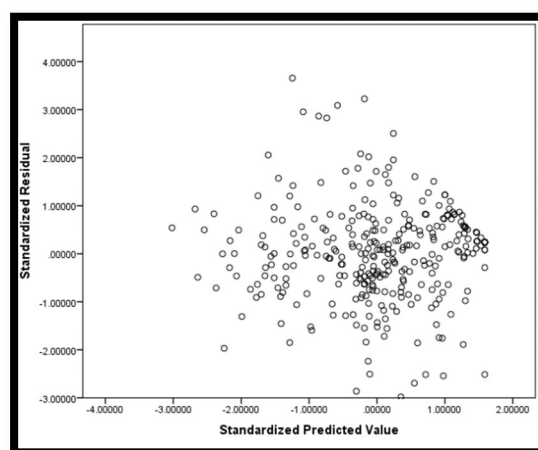


Figure 3: Scatterplot of Standardized Residuals against Standardized Predicted Values

The scatterplot in figure 3 reveals a random scatter of residuals around the horizontal axis, with no discernible patterns or systematic variance. These results indicate that the assumption of homoscedasticity was satisfied, supporting the validity of regression analysis.

3.3.5. Outlier Test

Identifying and addressing **outliers** is crucial, as they can disproportionately affect the regression results (Nayebi, 2020). Outliers can skew the estimates and lead to misleading conclusions. Outliers were checked using boxplots, which represent the interquartile range (IQR), with the horizontal line inside the box indicating the median (Starr & Goldfarb, 2020). The whiskers extend to the highest and lowest values within 1.5 times the IQR. Outliers are represented as dots outside the lower whisker, indicating extreme values towards the lower end on a 5-point scale. A visual impression of the boxplots is presented in figures 4 and 5.

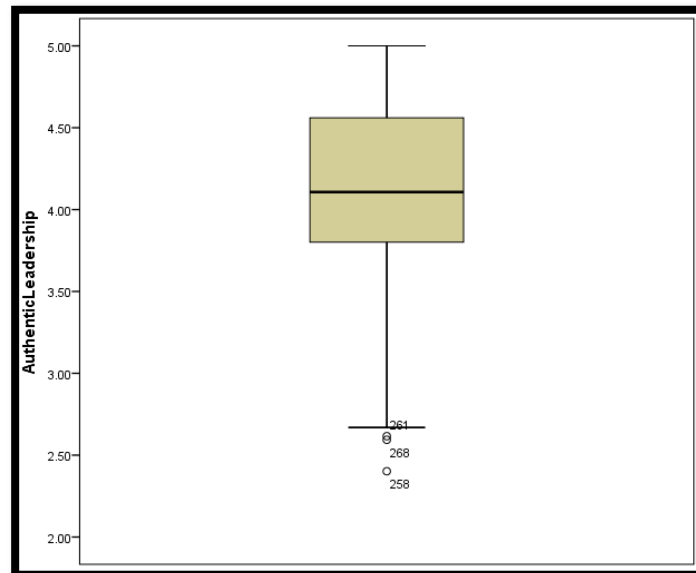


Figure 4: Boxplot of Authentic Leadership

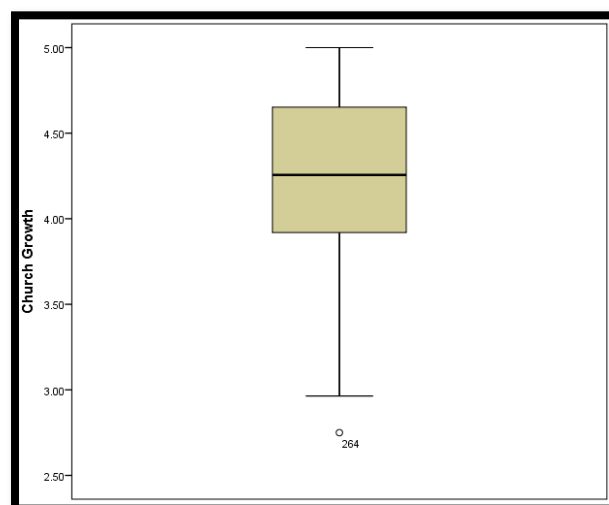


Figure 5: Boxplot of Church Growth

Inspection of the boxplots suggests that both servant leadership scores and church growth scores exhibited outliers, which are visible as dots outside the lower whisker, suggesting extreme values in both cases. This means that the assumption of no outliers was not met. This was mitigated through log transformation using the Transform command.

3.4. Inferential Analysis

This section presents the output regression analysis to test the statistical significance of the relationship between the study variables in response to each specific objective. Spearman's rank correlation and linear regression were applied to test the statistical significance of the coefficients at $p < .05$.

- Objective 1: To establish the impact of trust on church growth in Embu County, Kenya

The first objective of the study was to establish the impact of trust on church growth in Embu County, Kenya. Table 16 presents the Pearson correlation results, examining the relationship between trust and church growth.

		Church Growth	Trust
Church Growth	Pearson Correlation	1	.722**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	323	323
Trust	Pearson Correlation	.722**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	323	323
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Table 16: Pearson Correlation between Trust and Church Growth

The analysis revealed a strong, positive correlation between trust and church growth ($r=.722$, $p<.01$). This indicates that as trust in leadership increases, perceptions of church growth also tend to increase significantly. This finding agrees with authentic leadership theory as advanced by Avolio and Gardner (2020), who emphasize the role of trust as a key driver of both leadership effectiveness and organizational growth. The finding suggests that authentic leadership's focus on building trust is integral to fostering church growth, aligning with the theory's assertion that trust is foundational to positive leadership and organizational development.

The association between trust and church growth was analyzed using simple linear regression, as shown in table 17. The table presents the model summary, which depicts the explanatory power of trust.

Model Summary ^b						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.722 ^a	.521	.519	.35220		
a. Predictors: (Constant), Trust						
b. Dependent Variable: Church Growth						
ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	43.295	1	43.295	349.029	.000 ^b
	Residual	39.818	321	.124		
	Total	83.112	322			
a. Dependent Variable: Church Growth						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Trust						
Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.282	.160		8.022	.000
	Trust	.708	.038	.722	18.682	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Church Growth						

Table 17: Regression of Church Growth on Trust

The model summary indicates that trust explains 52.1% of the variance in church growth ($R^2=.521$, $p<.01$). The ANOVA results reveal that the regression model is statistically significant, $F(1,321)=349.03$, $p<.01$, demonstrating that trust significantly predicts church growth. The coefficients table shows that trust ($B=.708$, $p<.01$) is a significant positive predictor of church growth. For every one-unit increase in trust, church growth is expected to increase by .708 units. These findings underscore the importance of trust as a key driver of church growth. This finding is consistent with Walumbwa et al. (2020), who underscores the role of authentic leadership in fostering trust and transparency within organizations, leading to improved organizational outcomes such as growth. The results reinforce that authentic leadership's commitment to transparency and ethical behaviour plays a crucial role in promoting trust, which in turn drives church growth.

3.5. Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of interviews conducted with overseers and pastors followed a 6-stage process prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with data familiarization, where the researcher immersed in the transcribed interviews to gain a holistic understanding (Christou, 2022). Initial codes were generated by identifying significant phrases within the text, which were then grouped into sub-themes (Liu, 2024). An inductive coding approach where codes and themes emerge directly from the data was used (Naeem et al., 2023). These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and were distinct from one another. The final themes were named and defined to capture their essence, and a report was produced with supporting excerpts from the data to illustrate the findings. A total of 7 themes and 16 sub-themes were emergent. The 7 themes are: Teamwork, Visionary Leadership, Authentic Leader Attributes, Integrity Issues, Ethical Conflict in Leadership, Barriers to Church Growth, and Interventions for Church Growth. This section of the analysis presents the output of this process.

A descriptive analysis of the demographic profile of the interview participants is first presented, as shown in table 18. This is followed by the presentation, analysis, and discussion of emerging themes.

Demographic Variable	Response	Frequency	Percent
Age	Over 50 years	29	78.4%
	40-49 years	7	18.9%
	30-39 years	1	2.7%
	Under 30 years	0	0.0%
	Total	37	100.0%
Gender	Male	33	89.2%
	Female	4	10.8%
	Total	37	100.0%
Level of education	Diploma	10	27.0%
	Degree	8	21.6%
	Undisclosed	8	21.6%
	Post Graduate	6	16.2%
	High School	5	13.5%
	Total	37	100.0%
Theological Course	Yes	24	64.9%
	No	13	35.1%
	Total	37	100.0%
Tenure as a Pastor	Under 5 years	3	8.1%
	5 – 10 years	7	18.9%
	Over 10 years	21	56.8%
	Undisclosed	6	16.2%
	Total	37	100.0%

Table 18: Demographic Profile of Interview Participants

The majority of participants (78.4%) were over 50 years old, with 18.9% aged 40–49 years and only 2.7% aged 30–39 years. Most respondents were male (89.2%), while females made up 10.8%. Regarding education level, 27.0% held a diploma, 21.6% had a degree, another 21.6% chose not to disclose their education, 16.2% had postgraduate qualifications, and 13.5% had completed high school. Additionally, 64.9% of respondents had undertaken a theological course, while 35.1% had not. In terms of pastoral tenure, 56.8% had served for over 10 years, 18.9% for 5–10 years, 8.1% for under 5 years, and 16.2% did not disclose their tenure. This demographic composition highlights a predominantly mature, male, and experienced group of church leaders, many of whom have formal theological training.

3.5.1. Theme #4: Trust and Integrity Issues

The theme of integrity issues was manifest through the sub-theme of breach of trust and moral oversight, as reflected in table 19.

Verbatim Response	Code	Sub-theme	Theme
“I trusted two people/leaders with money, they stole. I no longer trust my leaders with liquid cash.” (Respondent #3)	They stole	Breach of trust	Integrity issues
“Over trusting new members who turned to be not good.” (Respondent #16)	Unverified information		
“Delegating duties to untrustworthy members only to realize he had a different character altogether.” (Respondent #29)	Over trusting		
“I gave unverified information which created tension in churches. Lesson: Verify every information.” (Respondent #30)	Untrustworthy members		
“I over trusted an assistant pastor to oversee the church while I was away not knowing that he will try to split the church.” (Respondent #33)			
“I ignored advice from a congregant. I wish I listened. I have purposed to listen to everybody.” (Respondent #15)	Ignored advise	Moral oversight	
“Withheld important church information from congregants.” (Respondent #17)			

"I chased a family from the church. I felt bad about it. I regret the act of sending the family away without a good reason." (Respondent #27)	Withheld information		
"I could not trust anybody and so I worked myself. I had to adjust to trust people to work with me." (Respondent #36)	Chased a family		
"Emphasized on church needs and realized members were overwhelmed. I chose to focus/emphasize on people." (Respondent #20)	Could not trust		
"Rushed projects which stalled." (Respondent #12)	Members overwhelmed		
"I over committed to the church in finances after failing to listen to my leaders, and because of it, we went through a very difficult moment in 2020." (Respondent #35)	Rushed project		
"Thought my opinion was always right, e.g., ways to give support by fundraising or pledges." (Respondent #24)	Overcommitted		

Table 19: Summary of the Theme of Integrity Issues

3.5.2. Sub-theme #4.1: Breach of Trust

Instances of breached trust were a recurring theme, with respondents reflecting on situations where their faith in others was betrayed. Leaders spoke of theft by entrusted individuals, misuse of responsibilities, and conflicts sown by members they trusted too quickly. These breaches underscored the importance of discernment in delegating responsibilities and verifying the character of those placed in positions of trust. For many leaders, these incidents were a wake-up call to establish safeguards and accountability measures to prevent future breaches. The following were the verbatim comments.

- "I trusted two people/leaders with money, they stole. I no longer trust my leaders with liquid cash." (Respondent #3)
- "Over trusting new members who turned to be not good." (Respondent #16)
- "Delegating duties to untrustworthy members only to realize he had a different character altogether." (Respondent #29)
- "I gave unverified information which created tension in churches. Lesson: Verify every information." (Respondent #30)

Some leaders expressed uncertainty or partial confidence in the trust they receive from their subordinates. Responses such as "hopefully" or "somehow" suggest an awareness of potential gaps in the leader-follower relationship, highlighting the ongoing effort required to foster trust. A notable group of respondents admitted to experiencing trust issues with their subordinates. This reflects challenges in leadership effectiveness, communication, or relational dynamics that undermine trust. For some, this has even led to disengagement or followers leaving the ministry. This finding aligns with Ortiz-Gómez et al. (2020), who assert that faith leaders are traditionally held to high moral standards and operate based on principles. However, cases of manipulation and betrayal within the Kenyan church, such as cult-like practices (Njiru & Mutuma, 2023; Omondi, 2022), highlight the erosion of trust in church leadership. Leaders who exploit vulnerabilities for personal gain (Kamau, 2020) exacerbate this issue, further emphasizing the importance of authenticity and discernment in leadership roles. These breaches highlight the need for authentic leaders to prioritize transparency, accountability, and the restoration of trust. Addressing trust deficits is critical to rebuilding effective leader-follower dynamics and fostering a stable foundation for church growth.

3.5.3. Sub-theme #4.2: Moral Oversight

Several respondents acknowledged personal lapses in judgment or moral oversight that led to regrets. These ranged from withholding critical information, ignoring advice, or overstepping their authority. Leaders recognized that their own integrity plays a foundational role in setting an example for others and in ensuring harmonious church operations. These experiences highlighted the need for self-awareness and a commitment to maintaining high ethical standards in decision-making. The following were the verbatim expressions.

- "Withheld important church information from congregants." (Respondent #17)
- "I ignored advice from a congregant. I wish I listened. I have purposed to listen to everybody." (Respondent #15).
- "I chased a family from the church. I felt bad about it. I regret the act of sending the family away without a good reason." (Respondent #27).
- "I could not trust anybody and so I worked myself. I had to adjust to trust people to work with me." (Respondent #36).

On the one hand, the acknowledgement of lapses in judgment supports Ortiz-Gómez et al.'s (2020) view that faith leaders are held to high moral standards. On the other hand, leaders failing to embody these standards reflect the broader decline in authenticity among some religious figures, as discussed by Kleynhans et al. (2022). For instance, cases of leaders exploiting followers for personal gain, as previously observed by Kisia (2023) and Gikuyu (2021), demonstrate the negative impact of moral failures.

3.5.4. Theme #7: Interventions for Church Growth

Analysis of the interview data showed that respondents expressed a collective desire for change that not only addresses the structural challenges but also focuses on enhancing the spiritual growth and outreach efforts of their churches and denominations. Thematic analysis yielded recommendations for church growth that manifested in three sub-themes: Increased Autonomy and Support, Improved Transparency and Communication, Spiritual Growth and Active Participation. Table 20 summarizes these recommendations.

Verbatim Response	Code	Sub-theme	Theme
"Small churches be supported in their initial stages" (Respondent #9) "Encourage higher level of autonomy at the local church level" (Respondent #8) "HQ should be assisting small upcoming churches" (Respondent #25) "Autonomy and self-propagation to be made more meaningful" (Respondent #22) "A more devolved approach on leadership" (Respondent #34)	Initial support Encourage autonomy Assist small churches Autonomy Devolved approach	Increased support and autonomy	Interventions for Church Growth
"More transparency especially on finance utilization" (Respondent #6) "Improved communication from top to bottom and vice versa" (Respondent #15) "Better communication." (Respondent #19) "Make it easy to open a church" (Respondent #37)	More transparency Improved communication Better communication	Improved transparency and communication	
Spiritually, members become more responsible" (Respondent #3) "Minimize the sideshows such as wealth and concentrate on the kingdom of God and His righteousness." (Respondent #12) "Develop common ministry practices which cut across all the churches. More Church members actively participating." (Respondent #15) "To be involved more people in the leadership" (Respondent #21) "I would like to see more active members" (Respondent #33)	Become more responsible Minimize sideshows Common ministry Involve people	Spiritual growth and active participation	

Table 20: Interventions of Recommendations for Church Growth

3.5.5. Sub-theme #7.1: Increased Support and Autonomy

A prevalent theme among the respondents is the call for more support from higher church authorities, particularly in the early stages of church development, and for greater autonomy at the local church level. Many leaders feel that empowering local churches with more freedom to make decisions and direct their ministries would foster growth and create a more dynamic, responsive community. This includes offering resources and mentorship to small or new churches and reducing the centralized control that often stifles innovation. Respondents emphasize that local churches should be able to operate more independently, allowing them to cater to their unique needs and contexts. The following were verbatim expressions:

- "Small churches be supported in their initial stages" (Respondent #9)
- "Encourage higher level of autonomy at the local church level" (Respondent #8)
- "HQ should be assisting small upcoming churches" (Respondent #25)
- "Autonomy and self-propagation to be made more meaningful" (Respondent #22)

These findings highlight the necessity of balancing authority with empowerment. The findings align with Matisi (2020), who argues that participatory leadership styles, particularly those fostering inclusivity and autonomy, are conducive to church growth. Similarly, Kadir et al. (2020) found that empowering leadership styles lead to innovation and institutional progress. Leaders who foster autonomy while providing structured support demonstrate authenticity through trust and encouragement, enabling the growth of vibrant, innovative churches.

3.5.6. Sub-theme #7.2: Improved Transparency and Communication

Another significant change identified by respondents revolves around enhancing transparency, particularly in financial matters, and improving communication between various levels of leadership. Many leaders expressed frustration

over a lack of openness, especially concerning how resources are managed and allocated. Transparency in these areas is seen as critical for building trust, promoting accountability, and ensuring that decisions are made in the best interest of the church community. Additionally, improved communication across leadership levels, from the top to the bottom, is seen as vital for aligning goals, sharing ideas, and addressing issues more effectively. Respondents believe that open and honest dialogue would create a stronger sense of unity and purpose within the denomination. Examples of responses are as follows:

- “More transparency, especially on finance utilization” (Respondent #6)
- “Improved communication from top to bottom and vice versa” (Respondent #25)
- “Better communication.” (Respondent #30)
- “Make it easy to open a church” (Respondent #37)

The emphasis on communication aligns with Ngeresa and Chemutai (2023), who found that open communication channels significantly improve team collaboration and performance. Authentic leaders in churches must prioritize transparency and open communication to build trust and align church objectives. By addressing resource management concerns and fostering an inclusive dialogue, leaders can create a more cohesive and effective church environment, driving sustainable growth.

3.5.7. Sub-theme #7.3: Spiritual Growth and Active Participation

Respondents also emphasized the importance of nurturing a deeper commitment to spiritual growth and encouraging more active participation among church members. Many feel that the church should be a space where members are not only consumers of services but active participants in ministry work. This would involve cultivating a culture of responsibility, where individuals are encouraged to take ownership of their faith and play an active role in evangelism, prayer, and community service. Respondents also highlighted the importance of ensuring that church members align their lives more closely with Christ-like principles, moving beyond the pursuit of material wealth and focusing on living according to biblical values. By fostering a culture of greater spiritual responsibility and involvement, respondents hope to build churches that are not only spiritually deep but also more mission-oriented and outward-focused. Some of the verbatim expressions were as follows:

- “Spiritually, members become more responsible” (Respondent #3).
- “Develop common ministry practices which cut across all the churches. More Church members actively participating.” (Respondent #15).
- “Minimize the sideshows such as wealth and concentrate on the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” (Respondent #22).

The findings align with Chipenyu (2021), who asserted that sound biblical doctrine is essential for fostering member maturity and church growth. Furthermore, Matisi (2020) highlighted the importance of spiritual engagement and inclusivity in leadership as key to success in church ministries. Authentic leadership in this context entails modeling Christ-like values and fostering a culture of active participation.

4. Summary of Findings, Implications, Conclusions, Recommendations

- Objective: To establish the impact of trust on church growth in Embu County, Kenya

The objective of the study was to establish the impact of trust on church growth in Embu County, Kenya. The composite mean score for trust was 4.18 (SD = 0.518), reflecting an overall high level of trust in the church leadership. Correlation analysis revealed a strong, positive correlation between trust and church growth ($r=.722, p<.01$), indicating that as trust in leadership increases, perceptions of church growth also tend to increase significantly. Regression analysis indicated that trust explains 52.1% of the variance in church growth ($R^2=.521, p<.01$), demonstrating that trust significantly predicts church growth.

The theme of integrity issues, however, arose when trust was breached within leadership contexts. Problems such as unverified information, over-trusting, untrustworthy members, and withholding advice reflected challenges in maintaining ethical standards. Breaches of trust undermined cohesion and created barriers to effective leadership. Moral oversight encompassed failures in judgment, such as rushing projects, overcommitting, or ignoring advice. Ethical conflicts in leadership emerged when financial ethics, excessive demands, or unbiblical orders disrupted trust and alignment. Leaders who faced such challenges had to navigate complex ethical dilemmas to maintain their credibility and the faith of their communities.

4.1. Implications

There are several theoretical implications that emanate from the findings. The study underscores the theoretical alignment between trust and authentic leadership theory in driving church growth. Trust in leadership serves as a cornerstone for fostering engagement, satisfaction, and church development. These results align with Avolio and Gardner's (2020) assertion that trust is a foundational component of authentic leadership, essential for effective leadership and organizational success. Additionally, the findings resonate with Heyns and Rothmann's (2021) work, which links trust to enhanced engagement. However, integrity challenges, such as unverified information and ethical conflicts, reveal the fragility of trust and its dependence on consistent ethical behaviour, transparency, and sound decision-making. This reinforces the theoretical premise that authentic leadership's emphasis on trust and ethical practices is critical for sustaining positive church growth.

4.2. Conclusions

The findings confirm that trust is indispensable to church growth, with leadership's integrity, reliability, and competence fostering stronger congregational relationships and engagement. Leaders who fail to uphold trust risk undermining cohesion and stalling growth, emphasizing the need for consistent transparency and ethical leadership. These reflections underscore that building and maintaining trust is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic priority for promoting church growth.

4.3. Recommendations

4.3.1. Recommendations for Church Leaders

Church leaders should prioritize building trust within the congregation, as trust was identified as a key factor driving church growth. Leaders should consistently demonstrate ethical behavior, transparency, and reliability, as these qualities foster positive relationships and engagement within the church. Additionally, church leaders should focus on providing clear, visionary leadership. A strong and well-communicated vision can inspire and guide the congregation toward shared goals, contributing to church growth.

4.3.2. Recommendations for Policy-makers

Church policymakers should implement and enforce policies that promote trust within the church. Ethical standards and transparent governance structures should be established to ensure the integrity of church leadership, which directly impacts church growth.

4.3.3. Recommendations for Leadership Developers

Leadership developers such as training consultants and executive coaches should prioritize and recommend the development of leaders who embody trust.

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