

# Leaders' Personal Ethics, Ethical Dilemmas, and Conflicts with Organisational Ethics: A Phenomenological Study of Christian Non-Profit Leaders Across Africa and Asia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500571>

Received: 20 May 2026; Accepted: 25 May 2026; Published: 08 June 2026

## ABSTRACT

The study explored how senior leaders within Christian non-profit organisations across Africa and Asia maintain moral behaviour when confronted with conflicts between personal ethics and organisational ethics. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research examined the lived experiences of eight senior leaders serving within Christian non-profit organisations across Africa and Asia. The study revealed eight elements a leader applies in dealing with a personal and organizational ethical dilemma. The elements included making moral decisions; showing compassion; reverting to spirituality and culture as the basis for moral and ethical convictions; doing the right thing and explaining the reason; making extraordinary decisions in extraordinary situations; considering what is at stake, helping stakeholders understand the rationale of choices, and making decisions that honour God; and serving people. A recommendation for further investigation on the influence of culture on personal and organizational ethics among Africans was made.

**Keywords:** Utilitarianism, pragmatism, ethics, morals, culture, spirituality, altruism

## INTRODUCTION

Ethical leadership remains a critical concern in contemporary organisations because leaders frequently encounter situations in which personal moral convictions conflict with organisational policies and expectations. Such conflicts are particularly complex within Christian non-profit organisations, where leaders are expected to uphold organisational accountability while simultaneously demonstrating compassion, stewardship, and service to others. Balancing these competing responsibilities often creates ethical dilemmas that require careful moral judgment and contextual decision-making.

Personal ethics are shaped by culture, spirituality, values, and lived experiences, whereas organisational ethics are expressed through formal policies, procedures, and codes of conduct that regulate behaviour within institutions (Lozano, 2005; Matsuo et al., 2019). Ethical tensions may arise when organisational requirements appear inconsistent with leaders' moral convictions or when policies do not adequately address humanitarian needs and contextual realities. Such tensions are particularly evident in multicultural environments where organisational systems interact with diverse cultural values and ethical traditions.

Existing research has examined ethical leadership, organisational ethics, and ethical decision-making extensively. However, limited scholarship has explored how Christian leaders operating across diverse African and Asian contexts navigate conflicts between personal ethics and organisational ethics. Insufficient understanding of these experiences limits both theoretical development and practical guidance for leaders facing complex ethical challenges.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how senior leaders within Christian non-profit organisations maintain moral behaviour when confronted with conflicts between personal ethics and organisational ethics. The study examined the lived experiences of eight senior leaders from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Zambia, Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, the Philippines, and South Korea. Particular attention was given

to the influence of spirituality, culture, humanitarian responsibility, and organisational accountability on ethical decision-making.

Findings contribute to ethical leadership scholarship by demonstrating how leaders navigate competing moral obligations through the integration of spiritual conviction, cultural values, contextual awareness, humanitarian concern, and organisational stewardship. The study further advances the emerging **Contextual Moral Stewardship Perspective**, which provides a framework for understanding ethical leadership within culturally diverse and mission-driven organisational settings.

## Background of the Study

Ethics has become an increasingly important area of inquiry within leadership and organisational studies because leaders frequently make decisions that influence organisational performance, stakeholder relationships, and institutional credibility. Ethical leadership requires leaders to balance organisational objectives with moral responsibilities, particularly when decisions affect the welfare of individuals and communities. Challenges arise when personal ethical convictions differ from organisational expectations, creating situations in which leaders must navigate competing moral obligations.

Christian non-profit organisations present a unique context for examining ethical leadership because organisational decision-making is influenced by both institutional policies and faith-based values. Leaders within such organisations are often expected to demonstrate accountability, stewardship, compassion, and service while adhering to organisational procedures and governance requirements. Tensions may emerge when organisational policies appear insufficient to address humanitarian concerns or contextual realities facing employees, beneficiaries, and communities.

Cultural context further shapes ethical decision-making. Leadership research has demonstrated that ethical values and leadership expectations vary across societies, influencing how leaders interpret responsibility, justice, accountability, and care (House et al., 2004; Weaver, 2001). African and Asian cultures often emphasise relational responsibility, communal well-being, and collective accountability, whereas many organisational systems reflect more individualistic assumptions. Interactions between these value systems may create ethical dilemmas for leaders operating within multicultural environments.

Despite growing scholarship on ethical leadership, limited research has examined how Christian leaders across Africa and Asia manage conflicts between personal ethics and organisational ethics in practice. Greater understanding of these experiences is necessary because ethical decisions frequently involve competing demands related to organisational accountability, humanitarian responsibility, cultural expectations, and spiritual convictions. Examination of leaders' lived experiences therefore provides valuable insight into how ethical leadership is exercised within culturally diverse and mission-driven organisational settings.

## Statement of the Problem

Organisations establish ethical policies, procedures, and codes of conduct to promote accountability, consistency, and responsible decision-making (Lozano, 2005). Despite the presence of such frameworks, leaders frequently encounter situations in which personal moral convictions conflict with organisational expectations. These tensions are particularly evident within Christian non-profit organisations, where leaders are expected to uphold organisational policies while simultaneously demonstrating compassion, stewardship, and care for vulnerable individuals and communities.

Ethical dilemmas become increasingly complex in multicultural environments where organisational systems interact with diverse cultural values and social realities. Humanitarian crises, economic challenges, staff welfare concerns, and cultural expectations may require leaders to make decisions that challenge established organisational procedures. Consequently, leaders are often required to balance competing obligations related to organisational accountability, personal morality, spiritual conviction, and contextual responsibility.

Although ethical leadership has received considerable scholarly attention, limited research has explored how Christian non-profit leaders across Africa and Asia navigate conflicts between personal ethics and organisational ethics. Insufficient understanding of these experiences limits knowledge regarding the factors that influence ethical decision-making and the strategies leaders employ when confronted with competing moral demands.

The problem addressed in this study was the limited understanding of how senior leaders within Christian non-profit organisations across Africa and Asia maintain moral behaviour and make ethical decisions when personal ethical convictions conflict with organisational policies and expectations.

### Research Purpose and Questions

The study explored how senior leaders within Christian non-profit organisations across Africa and Asia maintain moral behaviour when confronted with conflicts between personal ethics and organisational ethics. Specifically, the study examined:

1. How leaders navigate ethical conflicts between personal convictions and organisational expectations.
2. The influence of spirituality and culture on ethical decision-making.
3. The ethical dilemmas leaders encounter in practice.
4. Strategies used to reconcile competing moral obligations.
5. How leaders justify ethically contentious decisions.
6. The role of compassion and accountability in ethical leadership.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical behaviour is fundamentally experiential and is shaped by the interaction between personal convictions, cultural values, organisational expectations, and contextual realities. Exploration of ethical dilemmas therefore requires an understanding of ethics from both individual and organisational perspectives. Leaders frequently encounter situations in which competing moral obligations create tension between personal ethical convictions and organisational requirements. Examination of the literature provides a foundation for understanding how such tensions emerge and how leaders respond when confronted with complex ethical decisions.

#### Defining Ethics

Ethics refers to a system of moral principles that guides individual and organisational behaviour (French, 1995). Hazels (2015) described ethics as a framework of rules and standards accepted by a society or group to regulate conduct and encourage moral engagement. Moral awareness originates from an individual's understanding of what is right and wrong and influences ethical conduct in both personal and professional contexts (Skubinn & Herzog, 2016; Thayer, Johannesen, & Hardt, 1980).

Resnik (2011) conceptualised ethics as a set of norms that distinguish appropriate from inappropriate conduct while promoting consistency in decision-making and problem-solving processes. Ethical behaviour extends beyond compliance with prescribed rules and emerges through internalised moral attitudes, values, and dispositions (Alfano, Rusch, & Uhl, 2018). Etymologically, the concept originates from the Greek term *ethos*, which denotes the customs, character, and practices of a community or individual (Moriarty, 2012).

Demonstrations of ethical behaviour are commonly reflected through honesty, integrity, objectivity, humility, openness, respect, care, and confidentiality (Johnson, 2018; Resnik, 2011). Ethical conduct therefore encompasses both external behaviour and internal moral commitment, making ethics a multidimensional construct relevant to leadership practice and organisational life.

## Personal Ethics

The concept of ethos also refers to the customs, norms, and values that regulate individual moral conduct (Ambrose, Arnaud, & Schminke, 2007). Personal ethics emerge through the internalisation of moral values that subsequently guide behaviour, decision-making, and problem-solving processes (Skubinn & Herzog, 2016). A personal ethical framework serves as a foundation for self-leadership by influencing how individuals evaluate alternatives, exercise judgment, and determine appropriate courses of action (Luxon, 2008).

Core dimensions of personal ethics include integrity, fairness, credibility, transparency, prudence, courage, temperance, and justice (Johnson, 2018; Olson, 2013; Resnik, 2011). Ethical values shape personal choices because individuals tend to evaluate actions according to deeply held beliefs regarding what ought to be done in a particular situation (Abayomi, 2016; Skubinn & Herzog, 2016). Consequently, personal ethics contribute to self-discipline, accountability, responsible conduct, and a commitment to minimising harm while promoting fairness and human welfare (Mihelič, Lipičnik, & Tekavčič, 2010; Skubinn & Herzog, 2016).

Gilligan's (1982) Ethics of Care Theory provides additional insight into the relational dimensions of ethical reasoning. Ethical judgments, according to Gilligan, frequently arise through relationships characterised by compassion, empathy, responsiveness, and concern for vulnerable individuals. Unlike justice-oriented ethical frameworks that prioritise rules and universal principles, the ethics of care perspective emphasises relational responsibility and attentiveness to human needs. Relevance of the theory is particularly evident within collectivist societies where moral legitimacy is often associated with humane orientation, communal support, and protection of vulnerable members of society.

## Organisational Ethics

Organisational ethics refers to the system of values, norms, principles, and behavioural expectations that govern conduct within institutions (Lozano, 2005). Formal ethical frameworks generally include codes of conduct, organisational policies, governance structures, and accountability mechanisms designed to guide decision-making and regulate behaviour (Schwartz, 2002).

Development of organisational ethics is influenced by institutional culture, leadership values, strategic priorities, and stakeholder expectations (Sekerka, Comer, & Godwin, 2014). Organisational ethical systems establish standards for responsible behaviour and provide guidance regarding acceptable conduct within the workplace. Effective ethical frameworks contribute to organisational citizenship, responsible leadership, accountability, and trust among organisational members (McLeod, Tyge Payne, & Evert, 2016).

Alignment between organisational ethics and personal ethics often enhances organisational effectiveness, whereas divergence between the two may generate ethical dilemmas requiring leaders to navigate competing obligations and expectations. Leadership effectiveness therefore depends not only on policy compliance but also on the ability to reconcile organisational requirements with broader moral responsibilities.

## Ethical Leadership

Ethical Leadership Theory provides a useful framework for understanding leadership behaviour during ethical conflict. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) defined ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, communication, and reinforcement processes. Ethical leaders influence followers by modelling fairness, integrity, accountability, and concern for others.

Influence exerted by ethical leaders extends beyond enforcing organisational rules. Protection of stakeholder welfare, promotion of ethical cultures, and preservation of organisational integrity constitute equally important dimensions of ethical leadership. Moral credibility often emerges when leaders consistently align decisions with ethical principles, even under conditions of uncertainty and risk.

Complex organisational environments frequently require leaders to balance procedural requirements with humanitarian concerns. Ethical Leadership Theory therefore provides a valuable lens through which to examine leadership responses to situations characterised by competing ethical obligations and conflicting priorities.

### **Individual Morals and Organisational Ethics**

Relationships between personal morality and organisational ethics remain a central concern within leadership scholarship. Johnson (2018) argued that organisations must actively resist behaviours that undermine ethical conduct, including deception, exclusion, bureaucratic indifference, and self-serving decision-making. Ethical cultures emerge when leaders and organisational members collectively reinforce moral values and responsible conduct.

Research suggests that organisational culture often represents the institutionalisation of personal values shared by influential organisational actors (Carlson & Perrewe, 1995; Foote & Ruona, 2008; Koh & Boo, 2001; Sims, 1991). Ethical tensions may nevertheless arise when personal values differ from organisational expectations or when organisational systems fail to address contextual realities adequately.

Kantian ethics highlights the complexity of such conflicts. Kant's moral philosophy emphasises treating individuals as ends in themselves rather than as means to organisational objectives. Practical organisational realities, however, often prioritise efficiency, performance outcomes, and institutional goals. Tensions between human dignity and organisational interests therefore create ethical dilemmas requiring careful moral judgment (Szkudlarek, 2009).

### **Ethical Perspectives**

#### **Utilitarianism**

Utilitarianism advocates decision-making that maximises benefits for the greatest number of people (Sen, Williams, & Williams, 1982). Ethical legitimacy is determined primarily by consequences rather than intentions. Application of utilitarian reasoning frequently encourages leaders to evaluate potential outcomes and select alternatives that generate the greatest collective good.

Limitations of utilitarianism emerge when individual interests are sacrificed for broader organisational or societal benefits. Predicting consequences also remains inherently difficult, creating uncertainty regarding the ethical appropriateness of decisions (Johnson, 2018; Williams & Smart, 1973). Ethical conflicts may therefore arise when beneficial outcomes for the majority impose significant costs on vulnerable individuals.

#### **Justice as Fairness**

Justice as Fairness emphasises equitable treatment and impartiality in decision-making (Johnson, 2018). Ethical legitimacy derives from consistency, fairness, and equal treatment of individuals facing similar circumstances. Application of justice-based approaches within organisations may become challenging because individuals often encounter vastly different circumstances, needs, and vulnerabilities. Uniform treatment may therefore fail to achieve equitable outcomes, creating tension between procedural fairness and contextual responsiveness.

#### **Pragmatism**

Pragmatism emphasises transparent, evidence-based processes that facilitate effective decision-making (Johnson, 2018). Dewey's pragmatic perspective advocates systematic inquiry and rational evaluation when addressing complex problems.

Exclusive reliance on procedural rationality, however, may neglect moral and relational dimensions of leadership. Ethical challenges involving human suffering, vulnerability, or compassion frequently require leaders to consider values that cannot be fully captured through technical or scientific approaches to decision-making.

## **Altruism**

Altruism emphasises selfless concern for the welfare of others and encourages actions intended to benefit individuals or communities, even at personal cost (Darlington & Macker, 1966). Leaders guided by altruistic principles frequently prioritise service, care, and humanitarian responsibility. Potential tensions between altruistic behaviour and organisational ethics may arise when compassionate actions conflict with established policies or procedural requirements. Such tensions are particularly evident within collectivist cultures where leaders are often expected to assume parental or protective responsibilities toward followers (Hoffman, 1975).

## **Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory**

Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory provides an important framework for understanding ethical reasoning among leaders. Moral development, according to Kohlberg (1981, 1984), progresses through successive stages that move individuals from obedience-based morality toward principled ethical reasoning grounded in universal values.

Higher levels of moral development involve decisions guided by justice, human dignity, and ethical principles rather than unquestioning compliance with authority or institutional rules. Leaders operating at advanced stages of moral reasoning demonstrate a greater capacity to navigate ethical complexity, evaluate competing obligations, and make judgments that prioritise human welfare and moral integrity.

Application of Moral Development Theory within leadership studies helps explain why some leaders choose humanitarian intervention or compassionate action even when organisational procedures discourage such responses. Ethical decision-making therefore reflects not only organisational expectations but also the moral maturity of the decision-maker.

## **Transformational Leadership Theory**

Transformational Leadership Theory originated from the work of Burns (1978) and was later expanded by Bass (1985). Central to the theory is the proposition that leaders inspire followers to pursue goals that transcend personal interests and contribute to collective well-being. Transformational leaders exert influence through idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Moral dimensions occupy a prominent place within transformational leadership. Commitment to justice, compassion, service, and responsibility encourages followers to embrace values that support both organisational objectives and human development. Research indicates that transformational leadership contributes to organisational citizenship behaviour, moral courage, and commitment to the common good (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013). Relevance of the theory to ethical leadership becomes particularly evident when leaders must balance competing ethical responsibilities while addressing complex organisational challenges. Transformational leaders frequently seek solutions that uphold both moral principles and organisational effectiveness.

## **Spiritual Leadership Theory**

Spiritual Leadership Theory emphasises the role of meaning, purpose, faith, and service in leadership practice. Fry (2003) argued that spiritual leadership fosters organisational commitment and ethical behaviour through the cultivation of vision, hope, faith, altruistic love, stewardship, and service. Faith-based organisations frequently draw upon spiritual values as foundational sources of ethical guidance.

Accountability to God, stewardship of resources, service to humanity, and commitment to moral principles often shape leadership decisions during periods of ethical uncertainty. Spiritual Leadership Theory therefore offers a valuable framework for understanding ethical reasoning within Christian organisations.

Research has increasingly recognised spirituality as an influential factor in organisational effectiveness and ethical behaviour (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Zsolnai, 2011). Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) further argued that leadership behaviour is significantly influenced by spiritual convictions and perceptions of divine guidance. Reave (2005) similarly identified spirituality as a source of personal moral principles that shape leadership conduct. Empirical evidence suggests that spirituality contributes positively to individual well-being, organisational commitment, and ethical behaviour (Nasir et al., 2014). Consequently, spiritual values often function as higher-order moral frameworks that influence how leaders interpret ethical responsibilities and evaluate competing organisational demands.

### **Cultural and Indigenous Perspectives on Ethical Leadership**

Growing recognition of cultural influences on leadership has prompted increased scholarly attention to indigenous and contextually grounded ethical frameworks. Studies conducted by Lu, Rose, and Blodgett (1999) and Okpara (2014) demonstrated that cultural values significantly influence ethical perceptions and decision-making processes. Ethical leadership therefore cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural contexts within which leaders operate.

Cross-cultural leadership research indicates substantial differences between individualistic and collectivist societies regarding leadership expectations, ethical priorities, and decision-making approaches (Ayman, 2008; Dickson, Den Hartog, & Mitchelson, 2003; Weaver, 2001).

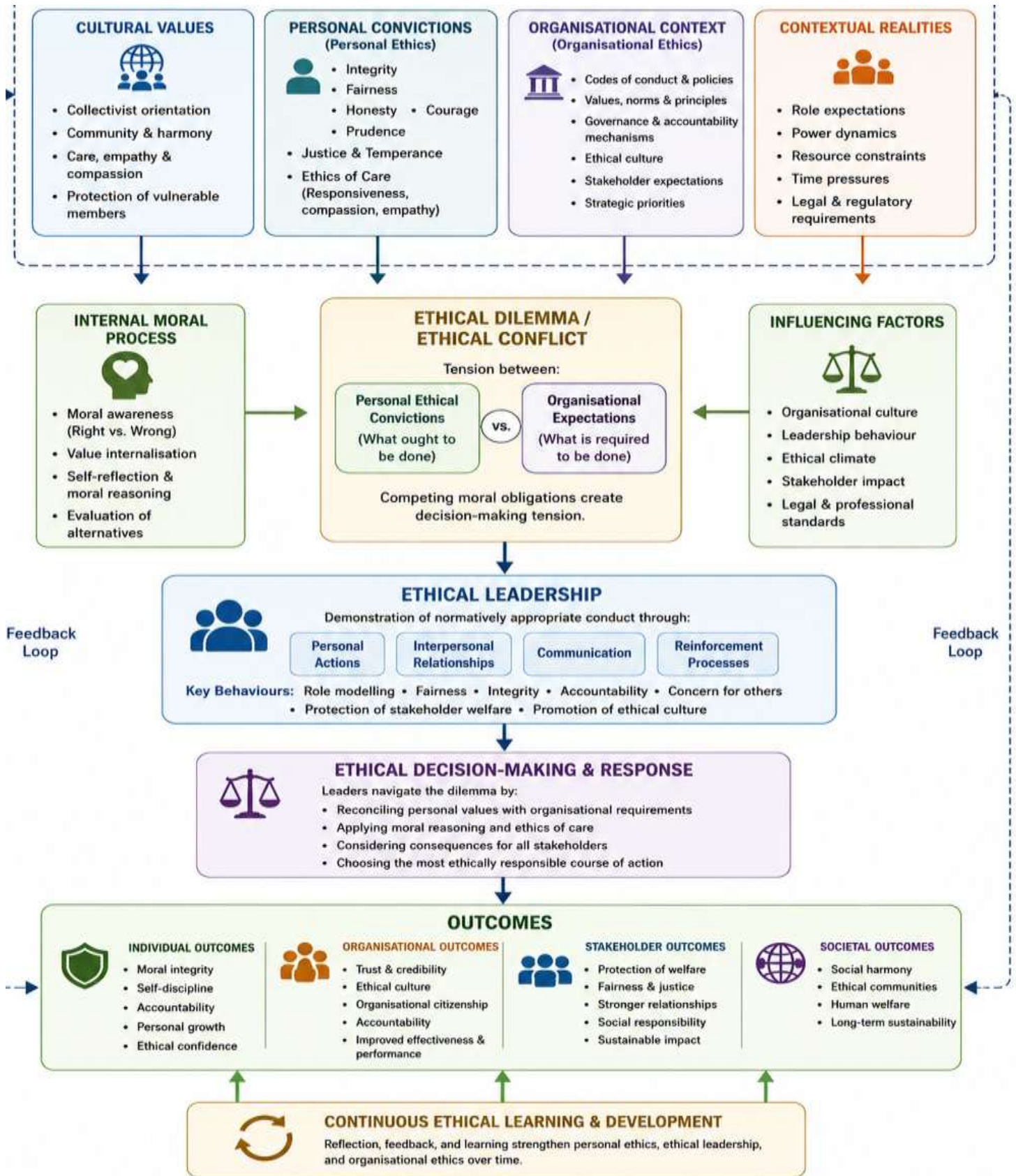
Leadership behaviours considered appropriate within Western contexts may not necessarily align with ethical expectations in African or Asian societies. Ubuntu represents one of the most influential indigenous African ethical frameworks. Principles associated with Ubuntu emphasise interconnectedness, communal responsibility, dignity, reciprocity, and collective well-being (Mbigi & Maree, 1995; Tutu, 1999). Ethical legitimacy emerges through service to others, preservation of relationships, and promotion of communal flourishing.

Comparable collectivist values are evident within many Asian societies. Concepts such as *Kapwa* in the Philippines emphasise shared identity, mutual care, relational accountability, and communal responsibility (Enriquez, 1992). Ethical decision-making within such contexts is frequently shaped by concern for relational harmony and collective welfare rather than individual autonomy.

Cultural perspectives therefore challenge universal leadership models that prioritise procedural compliance and individual rights while neglecting relational and communal dimensions of ethical responsibility. Understanding ethical leadership within multicultural environments requires recognition of the cultural foundations that shape moral reasoning, accountability, and leadership behaviour.



## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



The conceptual framework explains how leaders navigate ethical dilemmas within Christian non-profit organizations. Integration of Ethical Leadership Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, Moral Development Theory, Spiritual Leadership Theory, and Cultural and Indigenous Leadership Perspectives provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing ethical decision-making.



The framework begins with four key influences: cultural values, personal convictions, organizational context, and contextual realities. Cultural values shape perceptions of responsibility, care, justice, and accountability. Personal convictions include integrity, honesty, fairness, compassion, and moral reasoning. Organizational context consists of policies, governance systems, accountability mechanisms, stakeholder expectations, and organizational culture. Contextual realities include economic conditions, legal requirements, resource constraints, crises, and environmental pressures that influence leadership decisions.

Interaction among these factors activates the internal moral process, where leaders engage in moral awareness, reflection, ethical reasoning, and evaluation of alternative actions. Ethical dilemmas emerge when personal ethical convictions regarding what ought to be done conflict with organizational expectations regarding what is required to be done.

Ethical Leadership Theory occupies the centre of the framework by explaining how leaders translate moral reasoning into ethical behaviour through integrity, fairness, accountability, communication, and concern for others (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical decision-making involves evaluating competing obligations, considering stakeholder interests, assessing consequences, and selecting ethically responsible actions.

Transformational Leadership Theory explains how leaders respond with courage, sacrifice, and commitment to higher purposes when ethical decisions involve risk or uncertainty (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Spiritual Leadership Theory contributes stewardship, service, faith, and accountability to God, while Moral Development Theory explains the moral reasoning process underlying ethical judgment.

The framework culminates in outcomes at individual, organizational, stakeholder, and societal levels. Mission effectiveness and sustainable leadership represent the ultimate outcomes, reflecting an organization's ability to achieve its purpose while maintaining ethical integrity, stakeholder trust, organizational legitimacy, and long-term impact. Continuous ethical learning and development strengthen leadership effectiveness and ethical decision-making over time.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative phenomenological research design guided the investigation of ethical dilemmas experienced by leaders serving within Christian non-profit organisations. Emphasis was placed on understanding how leaders experienced tensions between personal ethical convictions and organisational expectations while making decisions within complex and often uncertain environments. Exploration centred on the meanings participants attributed to ethical conflict, moral reasoning, leadership responsibility, and decision-making processes (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology seeks to understand lived experiences from the perspectives of individuals who have directly encountered a particular phenomenon. Ethical dilemmas involve subjective interpretation, contextual judgment, spiritual reflection, emotional engagement, and relational considerations that are difficult to capture through quantitative approaches. Adoption of a phenomenological design therefore enabled an in-depth exploration of how leaders interpreted competing moral obligations, reconciled organisational requirements with personal convictions, and responded to humanitarian, cultural, spiritual, and organisational challenges.

Ethical Leadership Theory (Brown et al., 2005), Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006), Spiritual Leadership Theory (Fry, 2003), and Moral Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1984) provided the theoretical foundation for the study. Integration of these perspectives facilitated examination of ethical judgment, leadership influence, moral reasoning, spirituality, and cultural interpretation within diverse organisational contexts. The combined theoretical perspectives also informed the development of the emerging Contextual Moral Stewardship Perspective proposed by the study.

### Research Design

An interpretivist paradigm underpinned the research process. Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially

constructed and that meaning emerges through human interaction, experience, and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethical dilemmas do not exist independently of context; rather, leaders interpret ethical situations through personal values, spiritual beliefs, cultural norms, organisational expectations, and environmental realities.

An interpretivist orientation was particularly appropriate because the study sought to understand how leaders constructed meaning around ethical conflict and how those meanings influenced leadership behaviour. Focus on subjective experience enabled a deeper understanding of ethical decision-making processes within complex organisational settings characterised by competing moral obligations.

### Population and Sample Selection

Senior leaders serving within Christian non-profit organisations across Africa and Asia constituted the target population. Leadership responsibilities included organisational oversight, strategic decision-making, personnel management, and regular engagement with ethical challenges. Eligibility criteria required participants to possess direct experience with situations involving tensions between personal values and organisational expectations.

Purposive sampling was employed to identify information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). Selection focused on individuals with substantial leadership experience and demonstrated exposure to ethical dilemmas involving organisational policy, humanitarian concerns, spiritual conviction, and cultural expectations.

The final sample consisted of eight senior leaders representing Zimbabwe, South Africa, Zambia, Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, the Philippines, and South Korea. Inclusion of participants from multiple countries enhanced contextual diversity and facilitated cross-cultural examination of ethical leadership experiences.

### Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection. Use of semi-structured interviews ensured consistency across participants while providing sufficient flexibility for respondents to describe experiences, perceptions, and reflections in their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Open-ended questioning encouraged detailed discussion of ethical dilemmas, decision-making processes, spiritual influences, cultural considerations, accountability mechanisms, and organisational responses.

Yin (2018) emphasised the importance of asking focused and relevant questions when investigating complex human experiences. Interview procedures therefore required flexibility, active listening, and the ability to pursue emerging themes while maintaining alignment with the research objectives. Data collection focused on understanding actions taken during ethical conflicts, factors influencing decision-making, and approaches employed to reconcile personal ethics with organisational expectations.

Follow-up questions were used to clarify responses, explore emerging issues, and deepen understanding of participant experiences. Data collection continued until sufficient richness and depth had been achieved to address the research questions comprehensively. The following open-ended interview questions guided data collection:

**Table 1: Guiding questions interrogating data**

| Interview Questions                                                         | Theoretical Framework                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Have you made decisions conflicting organizational policies?             | Determining morals that govern an individual's values, and ascertain commitment to personal doctrine or system of life (Abaymi, 2016).                |
| 2) What decisions have you made that conflicted with organization policies? | Morality is considered intrinsically ingrained, learned through the progression of consciousness of the desire to do the right thing (Simpson, 2017). |

|                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3) What legal implications did the decision have?                                                              | Ethical decision requires critical process, avoiding reputational damage on self and organization (Foote & Ruona, 2008)                            |
| 4) How did your personal ethics conflict with the organizational ethics, and why did you choose your decision? | Applying Kant's categorical perspective, doing good to everyone (Johnson, 2018).                                                                   |
| 5) How would you place your morals when there is a conflict with the organizational requirement?               | Choosing to do the right thing, regardless of the cost (Johnson, 2018; Kim et al., 2015).                                                          |
| 6) What compromise do you take when the cons weigh more than the pros?                                         | Ethical decision making follows the process, applying ethical codes to ensure fairness, and justice (Johnson, 2018; Wotruba, Chonko, & Loe, 2001). |
| 7) How do you defend your actions when you make radical decisions?                                             | Ethical actions require cognitive dissonance and rationality (Kaptein, 2013).                                                                      |
| 8) How do you then re-align your ethics to organizational ethics?                                              | Personal ethics and organizational ethics require behavioral congruence (Elango et al., 2010).                                                     |

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided all stages of the research process. Procedures adhered to established standards relating to informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and protection from harm (Israel & Hay, 2006). Participants received detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, participation requirements, potential benefits, potential risks, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Protection of participant confidentiality remained a priority throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. Personal identifiers were removed from interview transcripts, and findings were reported using country identifiers rather than individual names. Secure storage and management of research data minimised risks to participants and safeguarded sensitive organisational information.

Respect for participant autonomy, dignity, and privacy informed all interactions throughout the research process. Ethical conduct during data collection contributed to the credibility and integrity of the study while promoting trust between the researcher and participants.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures informed by Saldaña's (2021) coding framework. Interview transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to facilitate familiarisation with the data and identify significant patterns. The coding process followed a two-cycle qualitative analysis approach consistent with phenomenological research (Saldaña, 2021). During the first cycle, open coding was employed to identify significant statements, meanings, actions, values, and experiences reflected in participant narratives. Codes remained closely aligned with participants' language to preserve the authenticity of lived experiences. These included emergency medical assistance, faith-informed decision-making, community obligation, acceptance of risk, and decision documentation.

During the second cycle, focused coding was used to consolidate related codes into broader conceptual categories. Categories such as Humanitarian Responsibility, Contextual Decision-Making, Relational Accountability, Spiritual Stewardship, Cultural Ethical Frameworks, Moral Courage, and Organisational Accountability emerged through constant comparison across participant accounts. These categories were subsequently synthesised into eight overarching themes: Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership; Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making; Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership; Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership; Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Reintegration; Moral Courage and Sacrificial Leadership; Ethical Tension Between Organisational Requirements and Humanitarian Responsibility; and Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks. that addressed the research questions and informed the conceptualisation of the **Contextual Moral Stewardship Perspective (CMSP)**. The coding structure provided a transparent audit trail linking participant narratives to thematic findings and theoretical interpretation, thereby enhancing the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña, 2021).

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the rigor and quality of the study, trustworthiness was established using the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The criteria provide a framework for evaluating the quality of qualitative research and ensuring that the findings accurately represent participants' lived experiences.

### **Credibility**

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately reflect participants' perspectives and experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several strategies were employed to enhance credibility. First, semi-structured interviews enabled participants to provide detailed accounts of ethical dilemmas and leadership experiences within their organisational contexts. Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings and explore emerging issues in greater depth. Second, interview transcripts were reviewed repeatedly during the analysis process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives. Third, thematic patterns were compared across participants from different countries and cultural contexts to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Such cross-case comparisons strengthened confidence that the themes reflected shared experiences rather than isolated viewpoints.

### **Dependability**

Dependability concerns the consistency and stability of the research process over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail was maintained throughout the study to document methodological decisions, coding procedures, theme development, and analytical reflections. Data analysis followed a systematic two-cycle coding process informed by Saldaña (2021), beginning with open coding and progressing to focused coding and thematic synthesis. Maintaining detailed records of analytical decisions enhanced transparency and enabled the progression from raw data to final themes to be clearly traced. Consistent application of the interview protocol across all participants further supported the dependability of the study.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings are derived from participant data rather than researcher assumptions or biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance confirmability, reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process. The researcher maintained reflective notes documenting personal assumptions, emerging interpretations, and potential sources of bias. These reflections helped distinguish participants' perspectives from the researcher's own views. In addition, coding and theme development were grounded in verbatim interview data, ensuring that interpretations remained closely aligned with participants' accounts. The inclusion of representative quotations in the findings section further supports the transparency and confirmability of the analysis.

## **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings may be applicable to other contexts or settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although qualitative research does not seek statistical generalisation, rich descriptions of participants, organisational contexts, and cultural environments were provided to enable readers to determine the relevance of the findings to their own settings. The inclusion of senior leaders from Christian non-profit organisations across multiple countries in Africa and Asia provided diverse perspectives on ethical leadership and enhanced the contextual breadth of the study. Detailed descriptions of the research setting, participant experiences, and thematic findings support informed judgments regarding the potential transferability of the results.

These strategies enhanced the trustworthiness of the study by ensuring that the findings were credible, dependable, confirmable, and contextually meaningful. The systematic application of trustworthiness procedures strengthened the integrity of the research process and increased confidence in the study's conclusions regarding ethical leadership within Christian non-profit organisations.

## **FINDINGS AND RESULTS**

Analysis of the interview data generated 208 coded occurrences, which were consolidated into eight interrelated themes explaining how senior leaders within Christian non-profit organisations maintain moral behaviour when confronted with conflicts between personal ethics and organisational ethics. Frequency counts were used to indicate the relative prominence of themes across participant responses rather than to establish statistical significance. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that ethical leadership is shaped by the interaction of humanitarian concern, contextual realities, relational responsibility, spirituality, culture, organisational accountability, and moral courage.

### **Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership (34 occurrences; 16.3%)**

Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership emerged as the most prominent theme, accounting for 34 coded occurrences (16.3%). Participants consistently prioritised the protection of life, care for vulnerable individuals, staff welfare, family support, and humanitarian intervention when organisational policies appeared insufficient to address urgent needs. Preservation of human dignity frequently served as the primary justification for decisions that diverged from established procedures. Ethical legitimacy was therefore closely associated with responsiveness to human suffering and commitment to serving others. Findings suggest that humanitarian concern represents the dominant influence on ethical leadership behaviour across diverse cultural and organisational contexts.

### **Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making (31 occurrences; 14.9%)**

Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making generated 31 coded occurrences (14.9%), making it the second most prominent theme. Economic instability, political uncertainty, humanitarian crises, organisational constraints, and social vulnerability frequently influenced leadership decisions. Participants emphasised that organisational policies were often developed without fully accounting for local realities, requiring leaders to exercise contextual judgment and adaptive decision-making. Ethical leadership therefore involved balancing organisational expectations with rapidly changing circumstances and practical realities. Findings indicate that context significantly influences how ethical dilemmas are interpreted and resolved.

### **Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership (29 occurrences; 13.9%)**

Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership accounted for 29 coded occurrences (13.9%). Participants consistently emphasised communal responsibility, relational accountability, family welfare, partnership preservation, and collective well-being when describing ethical decisions. African leaders highlighted communal obligations and social responsibility, whereas Asian leaders emphasised relational harmony, shared responsibility, and group cohesion. Ethical decision-making was frequently evaluated according to its impact on

relationships and communities rather than solely on procedural compliance. The prominence of this theme demonstrates the importance of relational ethics within both African and Asian leadership contexts.

### **Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership (24 occurrences; 11.5%)**

Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership generated 24 coded occurrences (11.5%). References to faith, stewardship, accountability before God, service, conscience, and spiritual conviction appeared consistently across participant responses. Ethical leadership was commonly described as a spiritual responsibility rather than merely an administrative role. Spiritual values provided a moral framework through which leaders interpreted ethical dilemmas and justified decisions that involved organisational risk. Findings suggest that spirituality serves as a foundational source of ethical guidance within Christian non-profit organisations.

### **Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks (24 occurrences; 11.5%)**

Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks also accounted for 24 coded occurrences (11.5%). Participants frequently referred to culturally embedded values that shaped perceptions of justice, accountability, responsibility, and care. African respondents described ethical obligations consistent with Ubuntu, including interconnectedness, communal support, and mutual responsibility. Participants from Asian contexts emphasised relational harmony, collective responsibility, and concepts similar to Kapwa. Ethical reasoning was therefore strongly influenced by cultural worldviews that shaped leaders' understanding of moral responsibility and organisational expectations.

### **Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Reintegration (23 occurrences; 11.1%)**

Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Reintegration generated 23 coded occurrences (11.1%). Participants rarely viewed ethical conflict as a basis for rejecting organisational accountability. Instead, leaders described efforts to reconcile controversial decisions with organisational structures through transparency, consultation, reporting, policy review, and stakeholder engagement. Ethical leadership involved adapting to extraordinary circumstances while maintaining commitment to organisational stewardship and institutional trust. Findings suggest that ethical conflicts often became opportunities for organisational learning and ethical reflection.

### **Moral Courage and Sacrificial Leadership (22 occurrences; 10.6%)**

Moral Courage and Sacrificial Leadership accounted for 22 coded occurrences (10.6%). Participants frequently described accepting personal, professional, and organisational risks when they believed humanitarian intervention or moral responsibility required action. Several leaders reported experiences involving audits, disciplinary reviews, organisational scrutiny, or criticism following controversial decisions. Commitment to ethical principles often required personal sacrifice and willingness to endure consequences associated with decisions perceived as morally necessary. Findings highlight the importance of courage in navigating complex ethical environments.

### **Ethical Tension Between Organisational Requirements and Humanitarian Responsibility (21 occurrences; 10.1%)**

Ethical Tension Between Organisational Requirements and Humanitarian Responsibility generated 21 coded occurrences (10.1%), making it the least frequent yet conceptually significant theme. Participants repeatedly described situations in which organisational policies, financial controls, donor restrictions, welfare procedures, or reporting requirements conflicted with urgent humanitarian needs. Ethical dilemmas emerged when leaders were required to balance compliance with perceived responsibilities toward vulnerable individuals and communities. Such tensions illustrate the complexity of ethical leadership within mission-driven organisations where multiple legitimate obligations compete for priority.



## Integrated Interpretation of the Findings

Frequency analysis reveals a clear pattern regarding the factors that most strongly influenced ethical leadership. Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership, Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making, and Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership collectively accounted for 94 coded occurrences (45.1%) of the dataset, indicating that humanitarian concern, contextual realities, and relational responsibility were the dominant influences on ethical decision-making.

When Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership and Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks are included, the cumulative total increases to 142 coded occurrences (68.3%). Such concentration demonstrates that ethical leadership within Christian non-profit organisations is primarily shaped by compassion, spirituality, culture, contextual awareness, and relational accountability rather than by procedural compliance alone.

The remaining themes—Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Reintegration, Moral Courage and Sacrificial Leadership, and Ethical Tension Between Organisational Requirements and Humanitarian Responsibility—accounted for 66 coded occurrences (31.8%). These themes illuminate how leaders managed organisational consequences, justified ethically contentious decisions, maintained accountability, and reconciled competing obligations following ethical conflict.

Overall, the findings indicate that ethical leadership is a dynamic process of balancing multiple legitimate responsibilities rather than choosing between ethical and unethical alternatives. Participants consistently navigated tensions among humanitarian needs, spiritual convictions, cultural expectations, organisational accountability, and contextual realities. Ethical leadership therefore emerged as an integrative practice grounded in moral responsibility, relational stewardship, contextual judgment, and commitment to human dignity. These findings provide strong support for the emerging **Contextual Moral Stewardship Perspective**, which conceptualises ethical leadership as the integration of humanitarian concern, spiritual conviction, cultural values, contextual awareness, moral courage, relational accountability, and organisational stewardship.

Table 1: Summary of Findings

| Broad Theme                                       | Representative Codes                                                                                                                                                                               | Codes | Freq | %    | Research Question Addressed |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------|------|-----------------------------|
| Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership | Ethics of care, compassionate intervention, humanitarian response, protection of life, family welfare, communal support, humanitarian rescue, dignity preservation                                 | 8     | 34   | 16.3 | RQ1, RQ2, RQ4               |
| Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making     | Contextual leadership, adaptive leadership, situational ethics, crisis intervention, rapid response, operational flexibility, contextual adaptation, strategic ethics, outcome-oriented leadership | 9     | 31   | 14.9 | RQ1, RQ2, RQ6               |
| Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership    | Communal responsibility, relational integrity, relational harmony, collective care, family preservation, partnership ethics, relational loyalty, communal obligation                               | 8     | 29   | 13.9 | RQ2, RQ4, RQ6               |
| Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership     | Spiritual accountability, faith-guided ethics, conscience-led leadership, ministry responsibility, accountability to God, spiritual conviction, servant leadership                                 | 7     | 24   | 11.5 | RQ2, RQ3                    |

|                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                    |    |     |      |          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|-----|------|----------|
| Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks                                          | Ubuntu, Kapwa, communal obligation, traditional morality, cultural adaptation, collective endurance, indigenous ethics, relational morality                        | 8  | 24  | 11.5 | RQ2, RQ6 |
| Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Reintegration                                       | Leadership adaptation, transparent reporting, accountability systems, policy adaptation, organizational reintegration, Leadership reform, financial reconciliation | 7  | 23  | 11.1 | RQ5, RQ6 |
| Moral Courage and Sacrificial Leadership                                            | Moral courage, sacrificial leadership, leadership accountability, collective sacrifice, mission commitment, courageous leadership, risk-taking leadership          | 7  | 22  | 10.6 | RQ4, RQ6 |
| Ethical Tension Between Organizational Requirements and Humanitarian Responsibility | Organizational tension, Leadership scrutiny, compliance conflict, institutional rigidity, audit conflict, policy resistance, legalistic ethics                     | 7  | 21  | 10.1 | RQ1, RQ5 |
| Total                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                    | 61 | 208 | 100  |          |

### Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership (Frequency = 34; 16.3%)

Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership emerged as the most prominent theme, generating 34 coded occurrences and representing 16.3% of all coded responses. The theme appeared most strongly in Research Questions 1, 2, and 4, which explored ethical conflicts, influences on ethical decision-making, and justification of controversial decisions. Participants consistently prioritized the protection of life, care for vulnerable individuals, staff welfare, and support for struggling families when confronted with ethical dilemmas.

Respondents described situations involving emergency medical assistance, humanitarian intervention, staff support, and financial assistance that required deviation from organizational procedures. Humanitarian concern frequently outweighed procedural considerations when participants perceived immediate threats to human well-being. Findings suggest that preservation of human dignity served as a primary ethical consideration influencing leadership behavior across all respondents.

### Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making (Frequency = 31; 14.9%)

Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making generated 31 coded occurrences, representing 14.9% of the data. The theme contributed primarily to Research Questions 1, 2, and 6. Participants repeatedly emphasized that economic instability, political unrest, conflict, inflation, and social vulnerability influenced ethical judgment and leadership responses.

Leaders frequently operated in environments where existing policies failed to address local realities. Ethical decisions therefore required adaptation to rapidly changing circumstances. Findings indicate that contextual awareness played a critical role in leadership decision-making, particularly when urgent situations demanded immediate action beyond established organizational procedures.

### Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership (Frequency = 29; 13.9%)

Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership accounted for 29 coded occurrences (13.9%) and contributed significantly to Research Questions 2, 4, and 6. Participants consistently emphasized communal responsibility, relational accountability, family welfare, team cohesion, and partnership preservation when explaining ethical decisions.

African respondents highlighted communal obligations, collective well-being, and social responsibility, while Asian respondents emphasized relational harmony, family commitments, and group cohesion. Ethical decisions frequently reflected concern for relationships and communities rather than individual interests. Findings suggest that ethical leadership operates through a relational framework in which responsibility extends beyond organizational boundaries.

### **Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership (Frequency = 24; 11.5%)**

Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership generated 24 coded occurrences, representing 11.5% of the data. The theme contributed primarily to Research Questions 2 and 3, which explored factors influencing ethical decision-making and the role of spirituality in leadership.

Participants frequently referred to stewardship, accountability to God, compassion, service, faith, and moral responsibility when describing ethical decisions. Spiritual convictions shaped interpretation of ethical dilemmas and provided guidance during situations where organizational procedures appeared insufficient. Findings demonstrate that spirituality functioned as an important source of ethical direction across all participating countries.

### **Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks (Frequency = 24; 11.5%)**

Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks also generated 24 coded occurrences (11.5%) and contributed primarily to Research Questions 2 and 6. Cultural values influenced perceptions of accountability, justice, responsibility, and care across both African and Asian contexts.

African participants frequently referred to communal solidarity, mutual care, and collective responsibility, reflecting principles associated with Ubuntu. Asian participants emphasized relational harmony, Kapwa, collective responsibility, and family obligations. Findings indicate that ethical reasoning is deeply embedded within cultural frameworks that shape how leaders interpret ethical responsibilities and organizational expectations.

### **Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Reintegration (Frequency = 23; 11.1%)**

Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Reintegration generated 23 coded occurrences, accounting for 11.1% of all codes. The theme contributed primarily to Research Questions 5 and 6, which explored ethical realignment and management of organizational risk.

Participants rarely rejected organizational accountability after controversial decisions. Instead, respondents sought transparency, reporting, consultation, policy adaptation, and reconciliation with leadership structures. Findings suggest that leaders viewed ethical conflicts as situations requiring organizational learning, adaptation, and reintegration rather than separation from organizational systems.

### **Moral Courage and Sacrificial Leadership (Frequency = 22; 10.6%)**

Moral Courage and Sacrificial Leadership generated 22 coded occurrences, representing 10.6% of the dataset. The theme appeared most strongly in Research Questions 4 and 6. Participants frequently accepted personal, professional, and organizational risks when they believed humanitarian intervention or ministry effectiveness required action.

Several respondents reported audits, disciplinary reviews, compliance investigations, and leadership scrutiny following controversial decisions. Despite such consequences, participants remained committed to decisions they believed served a greater moral purpose. Findings indicate that ethical leadership often required courage to act despite potential organizational repercussions.

## **Ethical Tension Between Organizational Requirements and Humanitarian Responsibility (Frequency = 21; 10.1%)**

Ethical Tension Between Organizational Requirements and Humanitarian Responsibility generated 21 coded occurrences, representing 10.1% of all coded responses. The theme contributed primarily to Research Questions 1 and 5. Participants repeatedly described situations where organizational policies conflicted with urgent humanitarian needs, staff welfare concerns, or community crises.

Tensions frequently involved donor restrictions, procurement requirements, financial controls, welfare policies, and reporting obligations. Leaders often balanced accountability to organizational systems against perceived responsibility toward vulnerable individuals and communities. Findings suggest that ethical dilemmas emerged most frequently when humanitarian needs and organizational requirements competed for priority.

### **Summary of Findings**

Frequency analysis and thematic analysis reveal that Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership (34 occurrences), Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making (31 occurrences), and Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership (29 occurrences) were the most dominant themes, accounting for 94 coded occurrences (45.1%) of the total dataset. Together with Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership and Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks, these themes accounted for 142 coded occurrences (68.3%), indicating that ethical leadership was primarily shaped by humanitarian concern, contextual realities, relational responsibility, spirituality, and culture.

Integration of the themes across the six research questions demonstrates that ethical dilemmas rarely involved choices between ethical and unethical behaviour. Participants instead navigated competing moral obligations involving human welfare, organizational accountability, spiritual convictions, cultural expectations, and leadership responsibility. Ethical leadership therefore emerged as a process of balancing multiple legitimate responsibilities while seeking outcomes that preserved human dignity, organizational integrity, and mission effectiveness.

### **Integrated Interpretation**

The ranking analysis confirms that ethical leadership within the study is fundamentally humanitarian and relational in nature. Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership, Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making, Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership, and Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership collectively account for 142 CODED OCCURRENCES (68.3%). These findings demonstrate that respondents primarily grounded ethical decision-making in compassion, contextual awareness, relational responsibility, and spiritual conviction.

The remaining themes illustrate how leaders managed the organizational consequences of such decisions. Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Reintegration, Moral Courage and Sacrificial Leadership, and Ethical Tension Between Leadership and Humanitarian Responsibility reveal the mechanisms through which leaders balanced personal ethics with institutional accountability. Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks provided the moral context shaping ethical interpretation across all national settings.

Overall, the frequency ranking reinforces the qualitative findings that ethical leadership in Christian non-profit organizations functions primarily through humanitarian responsiveness, contextual adaptation, relational stewardship, and spiritual accountability, while Leadership structures remain important but secondary considerations when leaders confront urgent human needs.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

Analysis revealed that ethical leadership within Christian non-profit organisations is shaped by the interaction of humanitarian concern, contextual realities, relational responsibility, spirituality, culture, organisational accountability, and moral courage. The eight themes collectively address the six research questions and provide

insight into how leaders navigate conflicts between personal ethics and organisational ethics across diverse cultural contexts.

### **Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership (RQ1, RQ4, and RQ6)**

Compassionate and Humanitarian Ethical Leadership emerged as the most prominent theme, accounting for 16.3% of all coded occurrences. Participant accounts revealed that preservation of human dignity, protection of life, staff welfare, and support for vulnerable individuals frequently influenced ethical decision-making. Humanitarian concern often became the primary consideration when organisational policies appeared insufficient to address urgent needs.

The theme directly addresses RESEARCH QUESTION 1, which examined how leaders maintain moral behaviour when confronted with conflicts between personal ethics and organisational ethics. Participants maintained moral behaviour by prioritising compassion, care, and responsibility toward individuals affected by their decisions. Humanitarian responsiveness therefore served as a practical expression of ethical leadership.

The theme also contributes to RESEARCH QUESTION 4, concerning strategies used to balance personal ethics and organisational ethics. Several participants described situations in which humanitarian considerations influenced decisions that deviated from established procedures. Rather than rejecting organisational accountability, leaders sought to balance policy requirements with concern for human welfare.

In addition, the theme addresses RESEARCH QUESTION 6, which explored the role of compassion and accountability in ethical leadership behaviour. Compassion emerged as a foundational influence on ethical judgment and frequently guided participants' responses to ethical dilemmas.

The results support Gilligan's (1982) Ethics of Care perspective, which emphasises empathy, relationships, and responsiveness to human vulnerability. Evidence from the study further extends Ethical Leadership Theory by demonstrating that ethical legitimacy is derived not only from policy compliance but also from responsiveness to human need (Brown et al., 2005).

### **Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making (RQ1, RQ2, and RQ6)**

Contextual and Crisis Ethical Decision-Making emerged as the second most prominent theme, accounting for 14.9% of coded occurrences. Participants frequently described ethical challenges arising from economic instability, political uncertainty, humanitarian crises, organisational constraints, and social vulnerability.

The theme contributes directly to RESEARCH QUESTION 1 by demonstrating that leaders maintain moral behaviour through contextual awareness and adaptive judgment. Ethical decisions were rarely made in abstract situations; instead, leaders evaluated ethical dilemmas within the realities of their operational environments.

The theme also addresses RESEARCH QUESTION 2, which explored factors influencing ethical decision-making. Participant narratives revealed that contextual realities often shaped ethical reasoning alongside personal values, spirituality, and organisational expectations.

Furthermore, the theme contributes to RESEARCH QUESTION 6 by illustrating how accountability and compassion were balanced within crisis situations. Participants frequently sought solutions that addressed humanitarian needs while preserving organisational integrity.

These observations support leadership scholarship emphasising the importance of adaptive responses to changing organisational and environmental conditions (Bass & Riggio, 2006; House et al., 2004).

### **Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership (RQ2, RQ4, and RQ6)**

Collectivist and Relational Ethical Leadership accounted for 13.9% of coded occurrences and highlighted the significance of relationships in ethical decision-making. Participants consistently considered the impact of decisions on families, communities, ministry teams, and organisational stakeholders.

The theme addresses RESEARCH QUESTION 2 by demonstrating how cultural values influenced ethical reasoning. African participants emphasised communal responsibility and collective well-being, while Asian participants highlighted relational harmony, shared responsibility, and group cohesion.

The theme also contributes to RESEARCH QUESTION 4 because relational considerations frequently informed strategies used to reconcile personal ethical convictions with organisational requirements. Decisions were often evaluated according to their effects on relationships and communities rather than solely through procedural criteria.

In relation to RESEARCH QUESTION 6, relational accountability emerged as an important dimension of ethical leadership. Participants viewed ethical responsibility as extending beyond organisational obligations to include obligations toward communities and stakeholders.

Patterns emerging from the interviews align with research on collectivist cultures and relational leadership (House et al., 2004; Mbigi & Maree, 1995; Tutu, 1999).

### **Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership (RQ2 and RQ3)**

Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Leadership accounted for 11.5% of coded occurrences and emerged consistently across all interviews. References to faith, stewardship, accountability before God, conscience, and service shaped participants' descriptions of ethical decision-making.

The theme directly addresses RESEARCH QUESTION 2 by demonstrating the influence of spirituality on ethical leadership behaviour. Participants frequently described spiritual convictions as guiding ethical choices when organisational policies appeared insufficient to address humanitarian concerns.

The theme also contributes to RESEARCH QUESTION 3, which examined ethical dilemmas arising from conflicts between organisational policies and personal moral values. Spiritual beliefs frequently informed participants' understanding of moral responsibility and influenced decisions involving competing ethical obligations. Analysis of participant narratives supports Spiritual Leadership Theory, which emphasises faith, stewardship, purpose, and service as foundations of ethical leadership (Fry, 2003; Reave, 2005).

### **Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks (RQ2 and RQ6)**

Cultural and Indigenous Ethical Frameworks also accounted for 11.5% of coded occurrences. Participants frequently interpreted ethical responsibilities through culturally embedded understandings of justice, accountability, care, and stewardship.

The theme addresses RESEARCH QUESTION 2 by demonstrating the influence of culture on ethical reasoning. African respondents described ethical perspectives consistent with Ubuntu, whereas Asian respondents highlighted values associated with relational harmony and collective responsibility.

The theme further contributes to RESEARCH QUESTION 6, illustrating how cultural values shaped interpretations of compassion, accountability, and ethical responsibility.

Evidence from diverse national contexts supports cross-cultural leadership research demonstrating that societal culture influences ethical behaviour and leadership expectations (House et al., 2004; Weaver, 2001; Okpara, 2014).

### **Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Reintegration (RQ5 and RQ6)**

Adaptive Leadership and Ethical Reintegration accounted for 11.1% of coded occurrences. Participants rarely viewed ethical conflict as a justification for rejecting organisational accountability. Instead, leaders sought to explain their actions, engage stakeholders, document decisions, and pursue reconciliation with organisational structures.

The theme directly addresses RESEARCH QUESTION 5, which explored how leaders justify and defend decisions that conflict with organisational expectations. Transparency, consultation, and reporting emerged as important mechanisms through which leaders explained controversial decisions.

The theme also contributes to RESEARCH QUESTION 6 because accountability remained a central consideration throughout the decision-making process. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of preserving organisational trust while responding to humanitarian concerns.

Such behaviour reinforces organisational ethics literature emphasising transparency, accountability, and ethical communication (Foote & Ruona, 2008; Sims, 1991).

### **Moral Courage and Sacrificial Leadership (RQ4, RQ5, and RQ6)**

Moral Courage and Sacrificial Leadership accounted for 10.6% of coded occurrences. Participants frequently described accepting personal, professional, and organisational risks when they believed ethical intervention was necessary.

The theme contributes to RESEARCH QUESTION 4 by illustrating how leaders balanced personal ethics and organisational ethics through principled action. Moral courage enabled leaders to act according to deeply held ethical convictions despite potential consequences.

The theme also addresses RESEARCH QUESTION 5, as participants frequently justified controversial decisions through reference to humanitarian outcomes, moral responsibility, and protection of vulnerable individuals.

In relation to RESEARCH QUESTION 6, willingness to accept personal sacrifice demonstrated the interplay between accountability and moral commitment. Participants consistently accepted responsibility for the consequences of their decisions.

The data provide support for Kohlberg's (1984) Moral Development Theory and research linking ethical leadership with moral courage and principled action (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Johnson, 2018).

### **Ethical Tension Between Organisational Requirements and Humanitarian Responsibility (RQ1, RQ3, and RQ5)**

Ethical Tension Between Organisational Requirements and Humanitarian Responsibility accounted for 10.1% of coded occurrences and represented the central challenge underlying many participant experiences.

The theme directly addresses RESEARCH QUESTION 3, which explored ethical dilemmas arising from conflicts between organisational policies and personal moral values. Participants described tensions involving donor restrictions, financial controls, welfare policies, reporting requirements, and humanitarian emergencies.

The theme also contributes to RESEARCH QUESTION 1, demonstrating how leaders maintained moral behaviour while navigating competing obligations. Ethical leadership involved balancing organisational accountability with responsibility toward vulnerable individuals and communities.

In relation to RESEARCH QUESTION 5, participants justified controversial decisions by emphasising humanitarian necessity, contextual realities, and moral responsibility.

Analysis indicates that ethical dilemmas emerged not because participants rejected organisational ethics but because multiple legitimate obligations competed for priority. Such evidence aligns with scholarship suggesting that ethical leadership frequently involves navigating competing moral claims rather than choosing between ethical and unethical alternatives (Johnson, 2018; Resnik, 2011).

## Theoretical Implications: Toward a Contextual Moral Stewardship Perspective

Collectively, the eight themes provide comprehensive responses to the six research questions and demonstrate that ethical leadership is shaped by the integration of humanitarian responsibility, contextual awareness, relational accountability, spirituality, culture, organisational stewardship, adaptive leadership, and moral courage. Ethical Leadership Theory (Brown et al., 2005), Moral Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1984), Spiritual Leadership Theory (Fry, 2003), and cross-cultural leadership scholarship (House et al., 2004) each explain important dimensions of the phenomenon. However, participant experiences suggest that ethical leadership emerges through the interaction of these influences rather than through any single theoretical lens.

The proposed CONTEXTUAL MORAL STEWARDSHIP PERSPECTIVE therefore conceptualises ethical leadership as the process through which leaders balance humanitarian concern, spiritual conviction, cultural values, contextual realities, relational responsibility, organisational accountability, and moral courage when confronted with competing ethical obligations. Such a framework offers a more holistic understanding of ethical leadership within Christian non-profit organisations and other mission-driven institutions operating across culturally diverse environments.

## Cultural and Spiritual Interpretations

Cultural and spiritual interpretations of ethical leadership revealed how participants' ethical reasoning was shaped by socially embedded values and faith-based moral commitments. Participant accounts indicated that ethical decisions were not guided solely by organisational policies; instead, leaders interpreted accountability, justice, compassion, stewardship, and service through cultural and spiritual frameworks. Empirical cross-cultural leadership research supports this interpretation, showing that societal culture significantly influences leadership expectations, ethical reasoning, and organisational behaviour (House et al., 2004; Dickson et al., 2003; Weaver, 2001).

The theme directly addresses **Research Question 2**, which examined how spirituality and culture influence leaders' ethical decision-making. African participants described ethical responsibilities in ways consistent with **Ubuntu**, particularly communal care, human dignity, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. Empirical work on Ubuntu leadership has shown that African leadership practices are often grounded in relational accountability, humaneness, and communal obligation rather than individualistic autonomy (Mangaliso, 2001; Ncube, 2010). Such evidence supports the interpretation that ethical leadership in African contexts extends beyond rule compliance to include responsibility for the well-being of others.

Participants from Asian contexts similarly emphasised relational harmony, collective responsibility, and group cohesion. Such perspectives align with empirical studies on collectivist cultures, which demonstrate that ethical decision-making is often shaped by concern for relationships, social harmony, and obligations to the group (House et al., 2004; Lu et al., 1999). Filipino cultural values associated with **Kapwa** further support this interpretation, as Kapwa emphasises shared identity, mutual respect, and relational responsibility (Enriquez, 1992; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000).

Spirituality also emerged as a central influence on ethical interpretation. Participants referred to faith, stewardship, accountability before God, prayer, service, and moral conviction as guides for decision-making. Empirical studies have linked spirituality in leadership with ethical behaviour, integrity, humility, compassion, and concern for others (Reave, 2005; Fry, 2003; Benefiel et al., 2014). Within Christian non-profit organisations, spiritual accountability therefore functioned as a moral compass through which leaders evaluated organisational policies and humanitarian responsibilities.

The theme also addresses **Research Question 6**, which explored how compassion and accountability influence ethical leadership behaviour. Participant accounts suggested that accountability was not understood only as compliance with organisational systems; accountability also involved responsibility to God, communities, staff, beneficiaries, and vulnerable stakeholders. Compassion was similarly understood not merely as personal kindness but as a culturally and spiritually grounded moral duty. Empirical research supports the connection



between ethical leadership, care for stakeholders, and moral role modelling (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño & Brown, 2004).

Overall, the evidence suggests that ethical leadership in Christian non-profit organisations is culturally and spiritually embedded. Organisational policies remain important, but leaders interpret and apply them through cultural values, spiritual convictions, relational expectations, and humanitarian responsibilities. Such interpretation strengthens the emerging **Contextual Moral Stewardship Perspective**, which views ethical leadership as the integration of organisational accountability, cultural responsibility, spiritual conviction, compassion, and stewardship within complex leadership contexts.

### Theoretical Contribution

The study contributes to ethical leadership scholarship by demonstrating that ethical decision-making within Christian non-profit organisations is shaped by the interaction of humanitarian responsibility, spirituality, culture, relational accountability, organisational expectations, and contextual realities. Participant experiences suggest that existing theories explain important aspects of ethical leadership but do not fully capture the complexity of ethical dilemmas encountered in culturally diverse and mission-driven environments.

Evidence supports Ethical Leadership Theory by highlighting the importance of integrity, accountability, and concern for others (Brown et al., 2005). Participant accounts further suggest that ethical leadership extends beyond organisational compliance to include responsiveness to human need and the preservation of human dignity. Results further support Spiritual Leadership Theory, which emphasises faith, stewardship, and service as influences on ethical behaviour (Fry, 2003), and reinforce cross-cultural leadership research demonstrating the influence of cultural values on ethical reasoning and leadership practice (House et al., 2004).

The principal theoretical contribution is the conceptualisation of the **Contextual Moral Stewardship Perspective (CMSP)**. The perspective proposes that ethical leadership involves balancing competing legitimate obligations arising from humanitarian concerns, spiritual convictions, cultural values, relational responsibilities, organisational accountability, and contextual realities. Rather than viewing ethical dilemmas as choices between right and wrong, CMSP conceptualises ethical leadership as a process of navigating multiple moral responsibilities while maintaining both organisational integrity and human dignity.

By integrating insights from Ethical Leadership Theory (Brown et al., 2005), Moral Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1984), Spiritual Leadership Theory (Fry, 2003), Ethics of Care Theory (Gilligan, 1982), and cross-cultural leadership scholarship (House et al., 2004), the study offers a more contextually grounded framework for understanding ethical leadership in culturally diverse and faith-based organisational settings.

### CONCLUSION

The interaction between individual ethics and organizational ethics remains an important field requiring deeper scholarly exploration. The findings from this case study demonstrated that ethical leadership is far more complex than adherence to organizational policies and formal ethical codes. Leaders operate within dynamic environments shaped by spirituality, culture, organizational expectations, humanitarian realities, and personal moral convictions. As demonstrated in this study, ethical dilemmas emerge when organizational ethics appear insufficient to address urgent human needs, forcing leaders to balance procedural accountability with moral responsibility and compassion.

The study revealed that spirituality and African collectivist culture significantly influence ethical decision-making. The participant consistently grounded leadership behaviour in accountability to God, service to humanity, compassion, and communal responsibility. These values at times conflicted with organizational systems influenced by Western individualistic approaches to ethics and accountability. The findings therefore suggest that ethical leadership cannot be fully understood outside the cultural and spiritual context within which leaders operate.

The study further demonstrated that ethical dilemmas often arise in extraordinary circumstances such as medical emergencies, financial hardship, and humanitarian crises where organizational policies may not adequately address contextual realities. In such situations, leaders rely on situational judgment, moral courage, and personal convictions in making decisions. Ethical leadership therefore becomes a process of negotiating competing moral systems rather than merely enforcing organizational rules.

The GLOBE studies provided important insights into the relationship between culture and leadership behaviour across societies (House et al., 2002; House et al., 2004). Similarly, Rashid and Ibrahim (2008) highlighted the influence of culture and religiosity on ethical behaviour. However, limited research has specifically examined how African leaders manage ethical conflict between personal morality and organizational ethics within practical organizational settings. African leadership contexts are strongly influenced by humane orientation, collectivism, spirituality, and relational responsibility, factors which may produce ethical responses different from those emphasized in Western ethical frameworks.

The evidence in this study therefore contribute to leadership and ethics literature by highlighting the importance of contextual and culturally grounded ethical analysis. Ethical systems developed primarily from Western perspectives may not always adequately address African communal realities and spiritual worldviews. Organizations operating within African contexts may therefore need to reconsider how ethical frameworks can balance accountability, compassion, cultural sensitivity, and humanitarian responsibility.

### **Practical Implications**

Findings from this study highlight the need for organizations to move beyond compliance-based ethics programs and develop leaders who can navigate complex moral dilemmas. Ethical leadership training should incorporate moral reasoning, contextual judgment, cultural intelligence, spiritual formation, and humanitarian decision-making. Leaders require practical tools that enable them to balance organizational accountability with compassion, human dignity, and mission priorities.

Organizations should establish ethical decision-making frameworks that guide leaders when organizational policies and humanitarian responsibilities conflict. Such frameworks should provide clear processes for consultation, documentation, accountability, and ethical review during extraordinary circumstances. Structured decision-making processes can reduce uncertainty while maintaining organizational integrity.

Leadership development programs should utilize case studies, simulations, and reflective learning based on real ethical dilemmas. Exposure to complex scenarios can strengthen leaders' ability to exercise moral courage, manage competing priorities, and communicate ethical decisions effectively. Development initiatives should focus not only on what leaders decide but also on how leaders justify, explain, and implement ethical decisions.

Findings further suggest that organizations operating across Africa and Asia should adapt leadership practices to local cultural realities. Communal responsibility, relational accountability, collective well-being, and cultural understandings of care significantly influence ethical decision-making. Leadership systems that recognize these cultural dynamics are more likely to gain trust, strengthen organizational commitment, and improve decision quality.

Spiritual formation should remain an integral component of leadership development within Christian organizations. Faith, stewardship, service, and accountability to God shaped ethical decision-making across respondents. Organizations should therefore create environments that encourage ethical reflection, spiritual maturity, and values-based leadership.

Practical application of these findings can strengthen organizational trust, improve ethical consistency, enhance leadership effectiveness, and increase an organization's capacity to respond responsibly to humanitarian and organizational challenges. Ethical leadership therefore requires organizations to develop leaders who possess both strong moral convictions and the practical skills necessary to navigate ethical complexity.

## Future Research

The study revealed several areas requiring further investigation. First, future studies should examine the influence of African collectivist culture on ethical leadership and organizational ethics across different organizational contexts. Comparative studies between African and Western leadership environments may provide deeper understanding of how culture shapes ethical decision-making.

Second, future researchers should explore the relationship between spirituality and ethical leadership behaviour in non-profit organizations. Quantitative studies may help determine the extent to which spirituality influences moral judgment, accountability, and organizational commitment.

Third, further research should investigate how leaders manage ethical dilemmas during humanitarian crises, emergencies, and resource limitations. Such studies may contribute to the development of ethical leadership models suitable for complex and unpredictable environments.

Fourth, future studies may explore how organizations can develop ethical frameworks that balance policy compliance with compassion and humane leadership practices. Research may also examine how organizational ethics can be contextualized within African cultural realities without compromising accountability and Leadership standards.

Finally, broader empirical studies involving multiple participants, organizations, and countries would strengthen understanding of the interaction between personal ethics, organizational ethics, spirituality, and culture in leadership practice.

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