Incarnational Leadership in Organizational Culture: Fostering a People-Centered Work Environment

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper explores how incarnational leadership, grounded in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, can nurture people-centred organizational cultures. The unresolved problem that has been studied is the difficult problem of cultivating genuine relational cohesion and ethical leadership within teams in contemporary workplaces. The study draws on a narrative review of recent scholarship in leadership, organizational behaviour, and practical theology to synthesise humility, empathy, presence, and self-giving service as core leadership virtues. These virtues are proposed as mechanisms through which leaders cultivate compassion, inclusion, psychological safety, and ethical conduct in the workplace. The paper develops an integrative model in which incarnational leadership shapes compassionate and inclusive cultures that, in turn, enhance employee engagement, trust, and collective resilience. In addition, the study highlights gaps in empirical research on spiritually informed leadership in diverse organisational contexts. The gaps in the literature are framed as a new diaconal leadership approach that addresses accomplished spiritual leadership from contemporary business thinking and suggests directions for future inquiry. Key findings indicate that adopting Christlike leadership improves acts of phenomena such as psychological safety, motivation to do good, as well as self-regulation, which subsequently fills the gaps of traditional leadership models. In practical terms, the findings can inform and develop mentorship frameworks, foster open-door policies, and strengthen ethical discourse for the purpose of building resilient, inclusive, high-performing teams. The overall contribution is to reframe organizational leadership as a relational and moral vocation, offering faith-informed yet broadly applicable insights for contemporary workplaces. Practical implications for leadership development and ethical people-management are outlined.

Keywords: incarnational leadership, organizational culture, inclusive leadership, workplace spirituality, employee engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Background: Contemporary organizations operate in environments marked by rapid change, workforce diversity, and rising levels of stress and burnout. These pressures have renewed interest in leadership approaches that foreground human well-being, ethical conduct, and high-quality relationships rather than narrow performance targets alone (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2024; Baluku et al., 2024). Recent research on positive and compassionate leadership shows that when leaders intentionally cultivate care, fairness, and psychological safety, employees report better mental health, stronger commitment, and higher engagement, even under crisis conditions (Ramachandran et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023). Faith-informed organisational evidence suggests that when leaders frame work as purposeful service, employees report stronger fulfilment and job satisfaction, which can reduce cynicism and support sustained engagement (Yakubu et al., 2025).

Alongside these trends, servant, spiritual, and inclusive leadership frameworks have stressed humility, empathy, and service as core leadership virtues. Empirical studies indicate that servant leadership enhances work

engagement and prosocial behaviour by building trust and supporting employees' growth (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Khan et al., 2023). Inclusive leadership, in turn, has been shown to strengthen psychological safety, affective commitment, and employee voice, especially in diverse and hospitality settings (Fatoki, 2024; Vakira et al., 2023). At the same time, organisational compassion is emerging as a key construct linking leadership to mental health, commitment, and engagement, particularly in contexts affected by disruption and crisis (Baluku et al., 2024). In periods of organisational turbulence, crisis leadership that combines practical preparedness with ethical steadiness and transparent communication is critical for protecting stakeholder trust (Manu et al., 2025).

Incarnational leadership draws directly on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, where God is understood as entering human experience through Jesus Christ in humble, embodied, and self-giving presence. Recent theological work in public practical theology emphasises incarnation as "embodied grace," calling leaders and communities to move toward people in their concrete struggles with empathy, solidarity, and sacrificial care (Nanthambwe, 2024). This theological motif resonates strongly with emerging organisational evidence that leadership rooted in empathy, humility, and practical service builds cultures of trust, belonging, and moral responsibility (Ramachandran et al., 2024; Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). The present study extends this conversation by examining how incarnational leadership can be translated into everyday organisational culture as a people-centred approach to leading teams.

Problem Statement: Although many organizations now acknowledge the importance of people-centred and ethical leadership, translating these convictions into daily practice remains difficult. Persistent reports of burnout, relational fractures, and moral failure indicate that formal value statements are often not matched by lived organisational culture (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2024; Baluku et al., 2024). Employees in many settings continue to experience low psychological safety, limited opportunities to voice concerns, and a lack of genuine inclusion, even under leaders who endorse "human-centred" rhetoric (Fatoki, 2024; Vakira et al., 2023).

Existing leadership models such as servant, authentic, and inclusive leadership make important contributions but frequently treat spirituality and theology as peripheral rather than as foundational resources for shaping organisational life. Empirical studies show that servant and compassionate leadership can increase engagement, prosocial behaviour, and resilience; yet these frameworks often lack a clearly articulated spiritual narrative that explains why leaders should embody humility, empathy, and sacrificial care beyond instrumental benefits (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Khan et al., 2023; Ramachandran et al., 2024). In theological scholarship, the doctrine of the Incarnation has been explored as a basis for public practical theology and social engagement, but there is still little systematic work connecting incarnational theology to organisational culture and leadership practice (Nanthambwe, 2024).

Against this background, the central problem addressed by the study is the lack of a clearly articulated and operationalised framework that shows how incarnational leadership principles—humble presence, empathetic identification, and self-giving service—can shape organisational culture into a compassionate, inclusive, and ethically grounded work environment. The study therefore asks: How can incarnational leadership be conceptualised and applied within organisational culture to foster a people-centred environment that strengthens team cohesion, psychological safety, and ethical leadership?

Objectives of the Study: In response to this problem, the study pursues four interrelated objectives. First, the study seeks to synthesise contemporary scholarship on compassionate, servant, spiritual, and inclusive leadership with recent theological work on the Incarnation, in order to clarify the defining features of incarnational leadership in organisations. Second, the study aims to develop a conceptual model that explains how incarnational leadership practices—such as embodied presence, deep listening, and service-oriented decision-making—shape organisational values, norms, and relationships into a people-centred culture.

Third, the study intends to examine how such a culture contributes to key outcomes, including employee engagement, psychological safety, organisational compassion, and ethical conduct, drawing on recent empirical findings in organisational behaviour. Finally, the study seeks to identify gaps and future research directions, especially regarding the empirical testing of incarnational leadership in diverse organisational and cultural settings where spiritual and ethical commitments interact with organisational performance expectations.

Significance of the Study: The study has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to leadership and organisational behaviour scholarship by explicitly integrating incarnational theology with contemporary leadership research. This integration deepens current understandings of compassionate, servant, and inclusive leadership by grounding them in a coherent theological narrative of embodied grace and self-giving love, rather than presenting them only as instrumental strategies for performance. By framing incarnational leadership as a distinct people-centred paradigm, the study offers a conceptual bridge between spiritual convictions and empirical findings on engagement, psychological safety, and organisational compassion.

Practically, the study provides leaders, managers, and human resource professionals with a values-based framework for designing cultures that treat employees as persons to be honoured rather than merely resources to be used. Incarnational leadership encourages leaders to "enter the world" of employees through attentive presence, shared vulnerability, and consistent service, which can strengthen trust, inclusion, and moral accountability in teams. Such a framework can inform leadership development curricula, mentoring and coaching programmes, and organisational policies that embed compassion, ethical integrity, and belonging into everyday practices, especially in faith-based or values-driven organisations. In contexts marked by inequality, insecurity, and moral fatigue, the study's emphasis on incarnational leadership offers a hopeful, people-centred pathway for building resilient, inclusive, and ethically robust workplaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Incarnational Leadership: Incarnational leadership is understood here as a form of leadership that embodies the logic of the Incarnation—drawing from Christian theology where God takes on human form—and translates this logic into organizational life through presence, humility, empathy, and self-giving service. Recent theological and organizational work argues that incarnational leadership is not simply a religious metaphor, but a practical orientation in which leaders "enter the world" of followers, share their conditions, and model relational faithfulness, rather than leading from distance or status (Irizarry, 2021; Nanthambwe, 2024; Okai et al., 2025).

In organizational settings, incarnational leadership manifests in practices such as intentional presence with staff, listening before directing, sharing burdens during crises, and making decisions that protect the dignity of vulnerable employees. By foregrounding humility and self-sacrifice, this model disrupts transactional and performance-only logics, and instead positions relationships, moral character, and service as the core of leadership effectiveness (Irizarry, 2021; Samul, 2024). Incarnational leadership therefore provides a theological and ethical frame for understanding how leaders can shape compassionate, inclusive cultures in everyday organisational routines.

Compassionate Workplace and Organizational Compassion: A compassionate workplace is an environment where people notice suffering, interpret it as worthy of attention, and respond with timely, practical help. Recent reviews describe compassionate leadership as a pattern of behaviour through which leaders demonstrate empathy, attend to individual circumstances, and create structures that support care at scale, rather than reducing compassion to occasional acts of kindness (Harris & Jones, 2023; Ramachandran et al., 2024).

At the organizational level, compassion involves shared norms and policies that legitimise care, such as flexible arrangements, supportive performance conversations, and fair responses to mistakes or crisis events (Nie et al., 2023; Pansini et al., 2024). Empirical studies show that organizational compassion buffers the negative effects of job insecurity, fosters post-adversity growth, and supports engagement by signalling that employees are valued beyond their instrumental contribution (Baluku et al., 2024; Nie et al., 2023). Within an incarnational frame, compassion is not only a pragmatic resource but an expression of leaders' commitment to share in the struggles of others, mirroring Christ's willingness to be present with human frailty.

Inclusive Organizational Culture: Inclusive organizational culture refers to shared beliefs and practices that value diversity and simultaneously foster belonging, so that people from different backgrounds feel respected, heard, and able to contribute meaningfully. Recent work conceptualises inclusion as the balance of uniqueness

and belongingness: employees are invited to express their distinct identities while also experiencing strong membership in the group (Korkmaz et al., 2022).

Empirical research shows that inclusive leadership—leaders who are open, accessible, and responsive to diverse perspectives—promotes psychological safety, employee voice, and innovation (Fatoki, 2024; Li et al., 2022; Qasim et al., 2022). Inclusive cultures emerge when these behaviours are reinforced by policies such as equitable recruitment, fair promotion processes, and mechanisms for addressing bias or exclusion. Inclusive climates have been linked to higher engagement, stronger helping behaviours, and more robust team performance, especially in diverse or conflict-prone settings (Shafaei & Nejati, 2024).

From an incarnational perspective, inclusion is more than compliance with diversity metrics; it reflects a commitment to see and honour each person as inherently valuable. Servant-like presence, listening across power differences, and sharing decision-making authority become practical expressions of incarnational inclusion.

Workplace Spirituality and Spiritual Leadership: Workplace spirituality describes organisational environments where employees experience meaning, connectedness, and alignment between their work and deeper values. Recent systematic and bibliometric reviews show a growing body of evidence that workplace spirituality enhances well-being, reduces burnout, and supports commitment, particularly when coupled with ethical or spiritual leadership (Nishanthi et al., 2025; Syahir et al., 2025).

Spiritual leadership is defined as leadership that motivates and inspires through vision, hope, faith, and altruistic love, creating an environment where followers experience a sense of calling and membership. Recent reviews demonstrate that spiritual leadership overlaps with servant, transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership, but adds a stronger focus on inner life, transcendence, and meaning-making (Samul, 2024). Empirical studies report positive relationships between spiritual leadership and outcomes such as work engagement, connectedness in blended teams, and job performance (Kumalo & Schutte, 2024; Maseme & Saurombe, 2025; Samul, 2024).

Incarnational leadership can be viewed as a specific expression of spiritual leadership that centres on the Incarnation as its normative pattern: leaders do not only speak about meaning and values, but embody them in proximity, shared vulnerability, and service. This provides a bridge between theological discourse and organisational practice, positioning spiritual leadership as a lived, embodied presence rather than a purely cognitive or inspirational style (Irizarry, 2021; Nanthambwe, 2024).

Theoretical Review

The literature reveals several overlapping leadership theories that inform the present study: servant leadership, compassionate leadership, spiritual leadership, and inclusive leadership. Each contributes distinct insights into how leaders can shape people-centred organizational cultures, while also highlighting gaps that incarnational leadership can address.

Servant leadership theory emphasises that leaders exist primarily to serve, focusing on the growth, well-being, and empowerment of followers. Recent studies show that servant leadership significantly enhances work engagement, psychological empowerment, and citizenship behaviours by building trust and signalling genuine concern for employees' development (Cai et al., 2024; Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). Okai et al. (2025) extend this logic by explicitly framing servant leadership within an incarnational paradigm, arguing that Christ-patterned humility, presence, and sacrificial love deepen employee identification and strategic engagement, especially in values-driven organisations. This theological grounding strengthens the normative base of servant leadership and clarifies why service is central rather than optional in leadership practice.

Compassionate leadership theory focuses on leaders' ability to recognise suffering, feel moved by it, and take wise action to alleviate it. Systematic reviews demonstrate that compassionate leadership improves well-being, resilience, and engagement, while also mitigating stress during crises (Ramachandran et al., 2024; Pansini et al., 2024). Harris and Jones (2023) argue that compassion is not sentimental softness but disciplined moral courage, requiring leaders to make difficult decisions that protect people and learning. Incarnational leadership builds on

this by rooting compassion in an incarnational vision of God's solidarity with human suffering, thereby positioning compassionate responses as a core expression of Christian leadership identity rather than an optional competency.

Inclusive leadership theory conceptualises leaders as architects of uniqueness and belongingness: they value different perspectives while creating a strong sense of team membership. Korkmaz et al. (2022) synthesise inclusive leadership research into four behavioural clusters: fostering uniqueness, strengthening belongingness, showing appreciation, and supporting organisational inclusion efforts. Empirical work links these behaviours to psychological safety, voice, and innovation (Fatoki, 2024; Li et al., 2022; Qasim et al., 2022). Incarnational leadership resonates strongly with inclusive leadership, as the incarnational pattern calls leaders to cross boundaries, remove barriers, and welcome those who are marginalised. Yet, most inclusive leadership research is secular and rarely explores theological motivations or spiritual identity as drivers of inclusion.

Spiritual leadership theory provides another important lens. Recent reviews position spiritual leadership as a meta-framework that interacts with servant, transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership, integrating meaning, calling, and membership with moral values and relational care (Samul, 2024). Empirical studies show that spiritual leadership enhances engagement, career satisfaction, and performance partly by strengthening workplace spirituality and perceived purpose (Kumalo & Schutte, 2024; Syahir et al., 2025). However, much of this work remains generic in its spiritual content and does not always address how specific faith traditions, such as Christianity, shape leadership practices.

Taken together, these theories converge on three themes: leadership as service rather than dominance; leadership as relational and emotionally attuned; and leadership as a catalyst for inclusion, meaning, and ethical conduct. Incarnational leadership synthesises these themes but adds a distinctive theological anchor—the life and ministry of Christ—as the normative model for how leaders show up, relate, and decide. This study therefore situates incarnational leadership at the intersection of servant, compassionate, spiritual, and inclusive leadership, arguing that it provides an integrative and explicitly moral framework for people-centred organizational cultures.

Empirical Review and Identified Gaps

Empirical research across sectors reinforces the claim that people-centred leadership styles have measurable benefits for employees and organizations. Studies on organizational compassion show that compassionate responses to hardship improve employees' psychological well-being, commitment, and engagement, especially under conditions of job insecurity or crisis (Baluku et al., 2024; Nie et al., 2023). Compassionate climates also predict post-adversity growth, as employees interpret care from leaders and colleagues as a signal of worth and belonging.

Servant leadership and spiritual leadership have been consistently associated with higher engagement, stronger affective commitment, and better performance. For example, Cai et al. (2024) show that servant leadership enhances work engagement through psychological empowerment and meaningful work, while Canavesi and Minelli (2022) highlight how servant leaders' relational presence and humility foster deep engagement in knowledge-intensive contexts. In similar fashion, Kumalo and Schutte (2024) find a strong positive relationship between spiritual leadership and employee engagement in private higher education, suggesting that leaders who communicate purpose and care can counter disengagement and turnover. Maseme and Saurombe (2025) further show that spiritual leadership strengthens connectedness in blended teams, enhancing collaboration in hybrid work arrangements.

Inclusive leadership research provides additional evidence that people-centred leadership styles improve climate and performance. Qasim et al. (2022) demonstrate that inclusive leadership increases helping behaviours via psychological safety, while Fatoki (2024) reports that inclusive leaders enhance employee voice through serial mediation of psychological safety and affective commitment. Li et al. (2022) find that inclusive leadership promotes innovative performance by stimulating team voice, showing how inclusion can be a driver of creativity and adaptation. These findings align with Shafaei and Nejati (2024), who show that inclusive leadership contributes to meaningful work experiences, which in turn support engagement and retention.

Workplace spirituality studies add another empirical strand. Syahir et al. (2025) provide robust evidence that workplace spirituality enhances employee well-being across contexts, while Nishanthi et al. (2025) demonstrate that spirituality contributes to organizational effectiveness through strengthened meaning, cohesion, and ethical orientation. These findings suggest that organisational cultures which make room for deeper values and purpose can support both human flourishing and performance outcomes.

Despite these advances, at least three gaps remain. First, very few empirical studies explicitly examine incarnational leadership as a distinct construct, even though some recent work frames servant leadership through an incarnational lens (Okai et al., 2025). The theological content of leadership is often downplayed or treated generically as "spiritual", limiting understanding of how specific faith narratives shape concrete behaviours, decisions, and cultural norms. Second, most empirical studies focus on either compassion, inclusion, or spirituality in isolation. There is limited research that examines how these dimensions interact as an integrated leadership and culture system—for example, how embodied, Christlike humility simultaneously fosters organizational compassion, inclusive practices, and spiritual meaning. Third, much of the evidence is drawn from Western or explicitly religious organisations, with fewer studies exploring how incarnational leadership principles might operate in pluralist, secular, or multi-faith workplaces, or in African organisational contexts where spiritual and communal values are pronounced but institutional forms vary.

These gaps justify the present study's focus on incarnational leadership as a people-centred, theologically grounded model for shaping organizational culture. By synthesising conceptual, theoretical, and empirical insights across compassionate, inclusive, servant, and spiritual leadership, the study seeks to develop a more integrated understanding of how incarnational leadership can foster compassionate, inclusive, and ethically robust work environments, and to propose directions for empirical testing in diverse organisational settings.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a conceptual narrative–integrative literature review design to explore how incarnational leadership can foster compassionate and inclusive organizational cultures. A narrative review was considered suitable because the topic sits at the intersection of theology, leadership studies, and organizational behaviour, and requires interpretive synthesis rather than statistical aggregation (Sarkar & Bhatia, 2021; Sukhera, 2022). At the same time, principles of integrative review were used to combine theoretical, empirical, and theological sources into a coherent framework that can inform leadership practice and future research (Dhollande et al., 2021; Oermann & Knafl, 2021).

The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between January 2020 and June 2025. Major databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, ATLA Religion Database, and Google Scholar. Search strings combined terms such as "incarnational leadership," "servant leadership," "compassionate leadership," "spiritual leadership," "inclusive organizational culture," "psychological safety," and "ethical workplace." The study included conceptual, theoretical, and empirical articles that (a) examined leadership models with explicit spiritual, moral, or theological grounding, and (b) reported outcomes related to employee engagement, trust, psychological safety, inclusion, or ethical conduct. Editorials, dissertations, book chapters, and non-peer-reviewed materials were excluded to preserve quality and comparability (Chigbu et al., 2023; Luft et al., 2022).

Screening proceeded through three stages: title and abstract review, full-text appraisal, and conceptual relevance assessment. At each stage, articles were evaluated for alignment with the study's focus on incarnational or closely related servant-spiritual leadership models and people-centred organizational cultures. The process followed current guidance on transparent search documentation and reasoned inclusion–exclusion decisions in narrative and integrative reviews (Chigbu et al., 2023; Dhollande et al., 2021).

Data analysis drew on reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns across theological and organizational texts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Extracted material was coded inductively for ideas related to humility, empathy, presence, service, compassion, inclusion, and ethical responsibility, and then organised into higher-order themes describing leadership practices, cultural mechanisms, and outcomes. The thematic work was iterative and interpretive, with themes refined through constant comparison across different disciplines and study designs

(Braun & Clarke, 2022; Sukhera, 2022). Throughout, the study applied integrative logic to link themes to an emerging conceptual model of incarnational leadership in organizational culture (Luft et al., 2022; Oermann & Knafl, 2021).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

This section interprets the conceptual "findings" of the narrative review by showing how incarnational leadership can practically shape organizational culture, while also interrogating its limits and boundary conditions. The analysis positions incarnational leadership as an integrative framework that gathers insights from servant, spiritual, compassionate, and inclusive leadership, but reframes them through the distinctive logic of presence, humility, and sacrificial service grounded in the theology of the Incarnation.

Incarnational leadership as an integrative, people-centred paradigm

Recent work on compassionate and spiritual leadership shows a clear movement away from purely instrumental, performance-driven models toward relational, value-centred understandings of leadership. Systematic reviews indicate that compassionate leadership enhances employee well-being, reduces burnout, and strengthens trust, particularly when leaders are consistently present, attentive, and fair (Ramachandran et al., 2023; Östergård et al., 2024). At the same time, studies on workplace spirituality and flourishing demonstrate that when leaders act from a sense of transcendence and moral purpose, employees report greater meaning, resilience, and relational connection (Syahir et al., 2025; Tigedi et al., 2024).

The present study interprets incarnational leadership as deepening these trends by locating compassion, humility, and presence in a narrative of God "with" people. This gives people-centred leadership an ontological anchor rather than leaving it as a set of optional styles or techniques. Where servant leadership typically emphasizes prioritizing followers' needs and empowering others (Aboramadan, 2022; Cai et al., 2024), incarnational leadership adds an explicit movement of "entering the world" of followers, sharing their burdens, and bearing costs for their flourishing. This move intensifies the ethical demand on leaders: the leader is not only expected to serve, but to be willing to absorb inconvenience, discomfort, or reputational risk in order to protect the vulnerable and restore the relationship.

At the same time, critical reflections on spirituality at work warn that spiritual language can be used to sanctify control or suppress dissent if not handled carefully (Vasconcelos, 2022). Incarnational leadership, therefore, cannot be reduced to religious rhetoric within otherwise unchanged power structures. For the model to retain integrity, spiritual language must be matched by transparent decision-making, shared power, and genuine openness to employee voice. This requirement aligns with broader evidence that "virtuous" leadership only yields positive outcomes when employees perceive authenticity and fairness, not mere symbolic gestures (Hunsaker & Ding, 2022; Ramachandran et al., 2023).

Mechanisms: compassion, presence, and psychological safety

The mechanisms through which incarnational leadership influences culture can be analysed along three interlinked pathways: compassionate behaviour, embodied presence, and psychological safety. Systematic reviews show that compassion expressed through individualized attention, supportive communication, and responsiveness to suffering builds a sense of safety and belonging, especially in high-pressure sectors such as healthcare and education (Östergård et al., 2024; Harris & Jones, 2023). These behaviours map closely onto the incarnational emphasis on "being with" people, listening deeply, and dignifying their experiences.

Empirical studies on servant leadership and work engagement provide converging evidence that when leaders exhibit humility, stewardship, and other-orientation, employees experience higher engagement, stronger relational bonds, and more willingness to go beyond formal job descriptions (Aboramadan, 2022; Cai et al., 2024). Workplace spirituality research further suggests that when leaders frame work as meaningful and morally significant, employees show greater psychological well-being and commitment (Syahir et al., 2025; Tigedi et al., 2024). The present study interprets these findings as partial empirical support for the mechanisms proposed in the incarnational leadership model: humble, present, and compassionate leadership generate a climate where employees feel seen, safe, and morally aligned with their leaders.

However, the review also indicates that compassion alone is insufficient without structural support. Compassionate leadership is most effective when combined with resources, workload adjustments, and organizational systems that protect staff from chronic overload and moral injury (Ramachandran et al., 2023; Östergård et al., 2024). Theologically informed calls for "bearing one another's burdens" must therefore translate into concrete practices such as reasonable staffing, fair distribution of tasks, and open error-management processes. This reinforces the argument that incarnational leadership is not merely a relational style but a structural commitment to reorganise power and resources around care and justice.

Organizational outcomes: engagement, resilience, and ethical conduct

Across the reviewed studies, people-centred and spiritually informed leadership styles are consistently linked with improved engagement, discretionary effort, and ethical behaviour. Servant leadership is associated with stronger work engagement, organizational citizenship behaviours, and moral responsibility, especially when leaders model humility and give employees genuine autonomy (Aboramadan, 2022; Cai et al., 2024). Similarly, research on spiritual and compassionate leadership highlights positive effects on resilience, team cohesion, and ethical sensitivity in decision-making (Hunsaker & Ding, 2022; Syahir et al., 2025). At the same time, ethical conduct is often undermined by persistent moral drivers such as greed and opportunism; recent risk-ethics scholarship argues that these vices should be treated as 'ethical risks' requiring board-level accountability and prevention systems, not only personal admonition (Karikari et al., 2025).

These findings support the central claim of the present study that incarnational leadership, as a spiritually grounded form of servant leadership, can function as a catalyst for resilient, ethical, and inclusive cultures. By joining compassion with moral clarity, incarnational leaders can create climates where employees are both cared for and held to shared values. Evidence from studies on spirituality and flourishing indicates that when employees experience alignment between personal values and organizational practices, they report higher levels of flourishing, hope, and prosocial behaviour (Tigedi et al., 2024; Syahir et al., 2025).

Nonetheless, the literature also warns against romanticizing people-centred leadership. Compassion and spirituality can generate expectations of constant emotional availability, which may expose leaders to emotional exhaustion if organizational structures do not distribute care responsibilities fairly (Ramachandran et al., 2023; Östergård et al., 2024). In some contexts, employees may also perceive highly relational, spiritual language as intrusive or inauthentic, especially in pluralistic or secular environments (Vasconcelos, 2022). These tensions underline the need for incarnational leadership to respect boundaries, honour diversity, and invite voluntary participation rather than imposing a particular religious framing.

Boundary conditions, risks, and contextual tensions

A critical reading of the literature suggests several boundary conditions for the effective practice of incarnational leadership. First, cultural context matters. In collectivist settings, relational presence, shared suffering, and familial metaphors of leadership may resonate strongly and reinforce existing values around community and mutual care (Fajar et al., 2024; Tigedi et al., 2024). In more individualistic or legally formal environments, however, strong spiritual or paternalistic framing may be interpreted as overreach or may raise concerns about coercion and religious neutrality (Vasconcelos, 2022). Incarnational leadership therefore needs careful translation into inclusive language that emphasises universal virtues—such as dignity, justice, and compassion—accessible to employees from diverse faith and non-faith backgrounds.

Second, power imbalances must be openly acknowledged. Studies on ethical and spiritual leadership caution that leaders sometimes use moral or spiritual rhetoric to demand sacrifice from subordinates while shielding themselves from cost or scrutiny (Hunsaker & Ding, 2022; Vasconcelos, 2022). An authentically incarnational approach must invert this pattern by locating sacrifice primarily on the side of the leader: leaders accept vulnerability, share information, admit mistakes, and open themselves to feedback. Evidence from compassionate leadership research shows that when leaders demonstrate vulnerability and openness, employees are more likely to disclose problems early and engage in learning-oriented dialogue, which strengthens both safety and performance (Ramachandran et al., 2023; Östergård et al., 2024).

Third, organizational systems need to reinforce, rather than undermine, incarnational practices. People-centred rhetoric is likely to ring hollow if reward systems still privilege individual heroics, aggressive competition, or short-term financial metrics. Research on spiritual and compassionate workplaces stresses the importance of aligning HR practices, performance appraisal, and promotion criteria with collaborative behaviour, ethical conduct, and contribution to community (Syahir et al., 2025; Fajar et al., 2024). Without such alignment, incarnational leadership risks becoming a personal style of a few "good" leaders rather than a cultural pattern embedded in policies and structures.

Propositions from the synthesis

On the basis of this analysis, the study refines four interrelated propositions about incarnational leadership in organizational culture. First, when leaders consistently embody humility and selfless service, employees are more likely to experience work as meaningful and to display higher levels of engagement and intrinsic motivation, echoing findings from servant and spiritual leadership research (Aboramadan, 2022; Cai et al., 2024; Syahir et al., 2025). Second, the integration of spiritual and ethical principles into day-to-day leadership behaviour is expected to strengthen trust and psychological safety, especially when leaders match moral language with transparent communication and fair procedures (Hunsaker & Ding, 2022; Ramachandran et al., 2023; Östergård et al., 2024).

Third, incarnational leadership should enhance organizational performance indirectly, by promoting ethical responsibility, cooperation, and resilience rather than by focusing only on short-term output (Fajar et al., 2024; Tigedi et al., 2024). Fourth, structured mentoring and developmental relationships grounded in incarnational principles are likely to increase job satisfaction, retention, and the emergence of new leaders who carry forward the same values (Hunsaker & Ding, 2022; Syahir et al., 2025). These propositions go beyond existing models by insisting that the leader's willingness to share burdens and costs is not an optional virtue but the central mechanism through which compassionate and inclusive cultures are forged.

In sum, the discussion suggests that incarnational leadership offers a promising, though demanding, framework for cultivating people-centred organizational cultures. Its strength lies in combining theological depth with empirically supported mechanisms of compassion, presence, and psychological safety. Its risk lies in the potential for misuse of spiritual language, emotional overload, or cultural exclusion if not carefully contextualised. The subsequent sections on implications and conclusion build on these refined propositions to outline how organizations might design policies, development programmes, and ethical safeguards that embody the spirit of incarnational leadership in inclusive and context-sensitive ways.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

This section draws together the insights of the review and the conceptual model to indicate what incarnational leadership means for leadership theory, organisational policy, and day-to-day practice.

Implications for Theory

The study suggests that incarnational leadership can be understood as an integrative, people-centred leadership meta-framework that weaves together servant, compassionate, inclusive, ethical, and spiritual leadership traditions into a single coherent lens. Servant leadership research already shows that humility, other-orientation, and service have consistent positive links with trust, engagement, and citizenship behaviours. By foregrounding the incarnational idea of "being with" followers in their context, the present framework strengthens this stream and emphasises relational presence and shared vulnerability as core mechanisms rather than simple prosociality or benevolence.

Compassionate leadership scholarship similarly highlights that noticing suffering, empathic understanding, and wise action shape climates of care and reduce burnout, especially in crisis-prone and high-pressure settings. Incarnational leadership aligns with this work but adds a stronger theological–moral anchor, treating compassion not only as an interpersonal skill but as a vocation grounded in spiritual calling. This extension invites scholars to examine how faith-informed values interact with secular norms in shaping psychological safety, ethical voice, and forgiveness after errors.

Inclusive leadership research has moved the field towards multi-level models that connect leader openness, belongingness, and recognition with diversity climate, voice, and performance. The incarnational perspective suggests that inclusion is not simply a set of leader behaviours, but the outworking of an identity in which leaders deliberately lower status barriers, share power, and identify with marginalised groups. This implies future theoretical work on how spiritual identity, moral purpose, and social identity processes combine to sustain inclusive climates over time.

Overall, the study invites leadership theory to take spirituality and moral purpose more seriously as core, not peripheral, elements of people-centred leadership. It encourages multi-level, longitudinal, and cross-cultural research designs that compare incarnational leadership with other value-based approaches and test its unique contribution to outcomes such as ethical resilience, restorative justice, and team cohesion.

Policy Implications

At the policy level, the model indicates that organisational rules, HR systems, and governance structures should be designed to make compassion, inclusion, and ethical consistency visible and measurable, rather than leaving them to individual preference. Evidence from inclusive and compassionate leadership studies shows that human resource practices aligned with inclusion, fairness, and psychological safety significantly enhance creativity, meaningful work, and positive employee responses to dissatisfaction.

For organisations that wish to apply incarnational leadership principles, this means integrating values such as humility, empathy, and service into leadership competency frameworks, recruitment and promotion criteria, and performance appraisal systems. Codes of conduct and ethics policies can be revised to highlight relational presence, restorative responses to failure, and protection of vulnerable employees as explicit expectations of leaders, not optional virtues. Diversity and inclusion policies can also be reframed to move beyond numerical representation, emphasising practices that strengthen employees' sense of belonging and encourage voice in difficult conversations.

Policy should also support structures that normalise compassionate and incarnational practices: for example, formal mechanisms for reflective dialogue after crises, institutional support for mentoring and pastoral care roles, and transparent channels for speaking up without fear of retaliation. Such policies signal that relational care and ethical courage are organisational priorities, not private choices, and create the institutional conditions in which incarnational leadership can take root. A redemption-driven CSR perspective similarly frames post-failure responsibility as restorative—transparent acknowledgement, practical repair, and long-term trust rebuilding— rather than reputation management alone (Yomboi et al., 2025).

Practical and Leadership Development Implications

For practice, the implications are highly concrete. The literature on compassionate and inclusive leadership shows that everyday leader behaviours (such as attentive listening, timely recognition, and openness to criticism) are key drivers of psychological safety, engagement, and creativity. The incarnational framework deepens this by encouraging leaders to adopt a posture of "coming alongside" employees, especially those on the margins of power or performance, and to treat their struggles as shared concerns rather than private weaknesses.

Leadership development programmes can therefore be redesigned to focus not only on technical competencies but also on character, self-awareness, and relational habits that reflect incarnational values. Evidence shows that when leaders cultivate inclusive and compassionate habits, employees experience their work as more meaningful, are more willing to take interpersonal risks, and show stronger identification with the organisation. In practice, this can involve training leaders in reflective practices, empathy-building exercises, and skills for restorative conversations after conflict or failure, as well as mentoring schemes that prioritise presence and modelling over control.

The study suggests that incarnational leadership can serve as a unifying language for organisations that wish to hold together high performance and deep care. By grounding strategic decisions, change processes, and daily management routines in humility, service, and solidarity, leaders can cultivate cultures where people feel seen,

respected, and invited to grow. Such cultures are more likely to withstand crises, retain talent, and deliver sustainable performance, especially in diverse and value-sensitive environments.

CONCLUSION

The study set out to conceptualise how incarnational leadership can shape organisational culture into a compassionate, inclusive, and ethically grounded environment. Across the reviewed literature, three themes consistently emerged: the centrality of humility, the transformative effect of empathic presence, and the organisational value of self-giving service. These virtues, when enacted by leaders, create the psychological and relational conditions that enable belonging, trust, and shared meaning. Evidence from servant, compassionate, spiritual, and inclusive leadership research shows that practices aligned with these virtues strengthen engagement, elevate moral sensitivity, and enhance resilience in times of organisational stress.

The study synthesised these insights into an integrative model in which incarnational leadership serves as a catalyst for compassionate and inclusive cultures. Leaders who "enter the world" of employees (through presence, vulnerability, listening, and fairness) cultivate climates where individuals feel valued, safe, and empowered to contribute meaningfully. Such cultures invite employees to enact prosocial behaviours, collaborate openly, and pursue shared values with deeper commitment.

Overall, the study reframes leadership not merely as a function of influence or performance, but as a relational and moral vocation grounded in dignity, solidarity, and restorative responsibility. It offers a faith-informed yet broadly accessible paradigm for building organisations that honour the whole person and promote sustainable, humane forms of effectiveness.

The study's conceptual nature limits its ability to generalise findings across sectors, cultures, or belief systems. Because most empirical evidence originates from Western or faith-based contexts, there remains insufficient understanding of how incarnational leadership functions in secular, pluralistic, or non-Christian environments. Future studies should therefore develop validated measurement instruments for incarnational leadership, conduct longitudinal and multi-level analyses, and examine its effects on trust, resilience, and ethical conduct across diverse organisational settings. Mixed-method and cross-cultural research designs are particularly needed to test how theological motivations interact with institutional norms, and to determine the boundary conditions under which incarnational leadership is most effective.

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