


# Youth as a valuable resource for sustainable leadership



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Leadership, fundamentally, is about people. It is especially during times of uncertainty, as created by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic when resources become scarce or inaccessible that people remain vital for continued and sustainable leadership. Yet, sustainable leadership is more than the longevity of an organisation. Sustainable leadership is also about community and developing people. The aims of sustainable leadership are most suitable within the church where the community is accessible. However, this article will not simply address the community in the church but the youth as part of the community as vital elements for sustainable leadership. Furthermore, the responsibility of nurturing and supporting the youth for leadership needs to be intentional. The article will address sustainable leadership through practical theology and social capital to achieve its aim.

**Contribution:** The article recognises that the dilemma of sustainable leadership cannot only be approached from a theological perspective but must engage with and pursue an interdisciplinary discussion. In this case, theoretical perspectives and approaches from leadership and social sciences were dialogue partners with theology to address sustainable leadership.

**Keywords:** sustainable leadership; leadership; social capital; youth; practical theology; church.

## Setting the context: Understanding sustainable leadership in a (South) African context

South Africa, like the rest of the world, has experienced a very traumatic time as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic affected all areas of life, including the church (see Aziz 2021; Pillay 2020:2). It may be even more accurate to say that life was disrupted by COVID-19 and the world has changed. It, therefore, would be too simplistic to say that only the health of the citizens was affected (Usher, Bhullar & Jackson 2020:2756ff.). However, the pandemic has had a direct and dire effect on the country's economic system, the psychological well-being of the person, as well as the spiritual nature of the person because of the changes of many religious institutions. During the national lockdown, which lasted more than 2 years, there has been an increase in unemployment, domestic violence, and gender-based violence, and a continuing downward spiral of national governmental leadership characterised by nepotism, corruption, and an inability to generate social cohesion and security (Gittings et al. 2021:947; Naidu 2021:3). In addition to the societal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the spiritual and religious aspects of society and individuals were also affected (Aziz 2021:1–2; Pillay 2020:2). Persons in the church were unable to fulfil basic religious rites and liturgies, such as communion, baptism, and the fellowship of believers within the proximity of another person. It was argued that the church also suffered financial losses as tithes were withheld for various reasons which affected the salaries of church-employed people and the payment of required services. Interestingly, there have also been church leaders who have struggled to normalise ministry during and post the COVID-19 lockdown especially when it came to ministering to the youth (Aziz 2021:2).

While many needs are required to be addressed for the church to return to a sense of normality, this article, however, will only focus on sustainable leadership, especially concerning the youth noting the strenuous time of youth ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sustainable leadership, in general, but specifically in the church is essential to the longevity and future of the church as well as to pass on the Christian faith to future generations (Aziz 2019:144), especially as sustainable leadership requires an extended community to resolve the many issues that confront an organisation (Shriberg & MacDonald 2013:2), in this case, the church. The relationship between Christian leadership and passing on the faith is clearly articulated in the scriptures where future generations are to 'imitate the faith' of their leaders (Heb 13:7). The passing on the faith, while not limited to only the youth, should remain an essential element of Christian ministry and focus and should also include a mutual relationship of nurturing and sustaining the faith between leaders and church community members. There can be no sustainable leadership in the church if the

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youth are not considered a vital element of its planning and function.

Furthermore, the subject of sustainable leadership will be approached using various theoretical approaches, namely, practical theology, sustainable leadership, and social capital. I will conclude the article by suggesting various strategies as a way forward for sustainable leadership.

## Practical theology as a foundation

The rationale for this study being in practical theology is that it seeks to interrogate the faith actions of faith communities as practical theology is primarily context-specific and also starts in context as a point of departure. When we move away from specific contexts, then practical theology ceases to be a useful approach to investigate any crisis as the reflection, resolutions, and suggestions became too general to apply to the community in question (Müller 2004:296). Osmer's (2008) method is well known and utilised in practical theology and asks some very specific questions regarding the context of a specific area of study. In addition, practical theology has historically been described as a discipline of crisis, in that it studies moments of crisis (Heitink 1999:2–4). Therefore, the typical approach in practical theology that this paper will follow is a reflection on sustainable leadership. Furthermore, practical theology is an interdisciplinary endeavour and can rightfully utilise the various theories in its pursuit of corrective actions regarding praxis.

## Sustainable leadership

Sustainable leadership, according to Wakahiu and Salvaterra (2012:151), is holistic and not focused on the leader's well-being and development in isolation from different forms of relationships within communities and creation. This mutuality of relationship is echoed by Shriberg and MacDonald (2013:2). Sustainable leadership, however, does not prescribe the nature of the relationship and thus can include anyone who can contribute to the holistic development of an organisation.

Wakahiu and Salvaterra (2012) define sustainable leadership as:

The ability for individuals and institutions to continue to adapt and meet new challenges and complexities in demanding and changing contexts ... [it] empowers others to improve human and resource capacity and provides an opportunity for leaders and stakeholders to network, learn from, and support each other in achieving organizational goals for the future ... Such leadership seeks to promote development and change for the better. (p. 152)

No discussion on sustainable leadership is complete without recognising the seven principles by Hargreaves and Fink (2003:1–12). The seven principles are depth, endurance, breadth, justice, diversity, resourcefulness, and conservation. The most applicable principle in this discussion is that of diversity and resourcefulness. Diversity is vital for sustainable leadership as it encourages and utilises diversity among the

constituency and does not merely seek a means to standardise and maintain the status quo. It should be noted that diversity includes age, gender, and culture and does not discriminate against any of the mentioned characteristics. Furthermore, sustainable leadership also learns from a diverse group as it pursues its goals. It encourages the concept of learning from people who are different through various networks and relationships. The principle of resourcefulness seeks to develop people and spur them on to greater achievements and leadership opportunities. Yet, the development of people cannot be restricted to only certain people, as people with different skills and experiences are vital to contribute to the various needs of an organisation. Resourcefulness should not be limited to only formal skills and knowledge, but also skills and knowledge acquired in life, cultural exposures, and personal gleanings.

An interesting study on religious women from various African contexts looks at how a marginalised population can make a difference through the focus on sustainable leadership (Wakahiu & Salvaterra 2012). Wakahiu and Salvaterra (2012:151) argue that under normal circumstances, marginalised people are seen more as a hindrance than a means to create a positive outcome. Yet, through sustainable leadership, these people's groups not only contribute to positive organisational outcomes but also exceed personal inhibitions and shortcomings. In this study, it was through mentoring and collaborative projects that positive outcomes were realised. Shriberg and MacDonald (2013:2) state that it is also through uncertainty that sustainable leadership is fostered. In other words, the need for answers and outcomes should not dictate or precede the nature of communal actions and decisions but should be organic (Shriberg & MacDonald 2013:3).

Finally, sustainable leadership is not just about how to preserve something that will last but how to incorporate initiatives and processes through relationships and networks that will not undermine or retard the development of others within the organisation (Hargreaves & Fink 2003:1–12). Ultimately, sustainable leadership should have the improvement of the quality of life as its main aim and the development of people to what they were meant to be (Shriberg & MacDonald 2013:11). This does raise the question then, is it possible for a single person to achieve sustainable leadership? On the contrary, as discussed, sustainable leadership requires a community and collaboration with others to develop the next person who will be able to contribute to the well-being of the next. Therefore, it is my opinion that this can be achieved through social capital, which will be the next part of the discussion.

## Sustainable leadership development through social capital

Nakagawa and Shaw (2004:10) argue that within any community and country, irrespective of its developmental stages, leadership and social capital as its most basic attributes are always present. It, therefore, is important to discuss what

exactly is meant by social capital and how it can be harnessed within any context.

Social capital, in brief, is a network of relationships fostered through trust, communal and shared interests and practices, and social norms inherent within a said group of people. However, social capital remains a multifaceted and ever-evolving construct (Swart 2017:224–231). Social capital, writes Pye (2001:376), ‘testifies to the critical level of trust among the members of a society that makes collective action possible’. As social capital resides on the premise of relations (Swart 2017:224–231), the level of trust is a significant factor and contributor to the development and continued sustainability of social capital (cf. Grew 2001:94).

The trust generated for social capital comes from continued engagement and practices among people within the community. The engagement and practices are not because of a single activity but continued activities that encourage engagement. The church, too, is instrumental in the generation of social capital, especially through regular church attendance and active involvement in church activities (cf. Aziz 2019:138).

Three different types of social capital have emerged through various studies, namely, bonding, bridging, and linking social capital (Swart 2017:227). These three types of social capital are discussed later in the text after which an application for sustainable leadership in the church will be proposed.

### Bonding social capital

Bonding social capital is mainly between close members within a similar demographic group. These could include formal groups, families, communities, and organisations with mutual philosophies and goals such as religious organisations, sports, and social clubs (cf. Carmen et al. 2022:1375). Wuthnow (2002:670) explains that bonding focuses on the needs, interests, and well-being of the group.

### Bridging social capital

Bridging social capital is mainly between members of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds but with similar economic and political interests and similarities. In a sense, bridging ‘requires that people look beyond their immediate social circles and depends on institutions capable of nurturing cooperation among heterogeneous groups ... transcending social differences’ (Wuthnow 2002:670).

It should also be noted that a basic function of Christianity is to reach other people through sharing of their faith, community outreach through various projects, and even NGOs and basic response to one’s humanity as an act of love. After all, Jesus Christ said that the world will know who his disciples are through acts of love (Jn 13:35). In this sense, bridging social capital is also a possibility because of these actions of the Christian (cf. Cnaan, Boddie & Yancey 2003:26).

Social capital should ultimately be about service to the greater community (Aziz 2019:143), and the development of the next person to achieve their full potential. This aspect of social bridging capital also coincides with some of the aims of sustainable leadership which cares about the well-being of people, including the rest of the created order such as animals and the environment (cf. Shriberg & MacDonald 2013:1–12).

### Linking social capital

Linking social capital is found mainly among people who have similar power and authoritative roles and functions within communities, such as political leaders, school authorities, among others. In other words, linking social capital has a more vertical focus on hierarchy instead of relationship as opposed to bonding and bridging (cf. Poortinga 2012:288).

Social capital in this paper is best described and defined as, ‘the function of mutual trust, social networks of both individuals and groups, and social norms such as obligation and willingness toward mutually beneficial collective action’ (Nakagawa & Shaw 2004:4). In brief, according to Nakagawa and Shaw (2004:10), the most basic elements are trust, social norms, participation, and networking. The ‘beneficial collective action’ in this paper is sustainable leadership underpinned by social capital theory. The trust in question in this paper is facilitated by persons in leadership positions in the church.

The aim and purpose of social capital is to allow different people to work together to achieve a common purpose and goal. Furthermore, social capital allows people, particularly the more vulnerable, to collaborate and work together who under any other circumstance may not have the opportunity to work together in pursuit of a common goal and purpose (Swart 2017:229). It is believed that this common activity is fostered in an environment of trust, common and shared identity, and organisational ethos. In addition, social capital also challenges the ‘top-down’ approach in a hierarchical setting but emphasises complementary relationships and interdependence (Swart 2017:229).

The ideal type of social capital, therefore, suited for this study is bonding social capital as the context comprises different people with similar goals and visions within a closed or similar demographic. Bonding social capital, while limiting the bonding to persons within a community does not exclude anyone in that community based on their age, gender, or experience as the aim is to preserve and improve the dynamics of that community. From this discussion, one can suggest that youth also fulfil the most basic requirement for bonding social capital by merely belonging.

## Youth as a valuable resource for sustainable leadership

It was the Archbishop of Canterbury who once said the church is just one generation away from extinction. The context of the

saying was amid a decline in church membership on the European continent and that there should be earnest efforts made in reaching the youth. While that may be disputed on theological grounds, the warning still is a constant reminder that the future of the church resides with its youth.

Apart from belonging to a community which automatically qualifies youth for leadership, they are often marginalised for being too young and too inexperienced for inclusion in church leadership (cf. Aziz 2020:4). Recent research, however, has shown that youth are ideal for leadership roles irrespective of age or life experience (Aziz 2020). The suitability for leadership roles and responsibilities arises purely from their humanity and the influence that comes from their humanity. It cannot be assumed that youth are not suitable for any form of leadership because of their various social categorisations. Furthermore, having youth as the object of leadership encourages their personal development, and continuity by encouraging participation in the community, and the longevity of the organisation (Aziz 2020:6, 2019:133–151).

### Conceptualising youth

When discussing youth, a standard definition often includes age and markers of puberty. Yet, research has proven that it becomes increasingly difficult to define youth along the lines of age and puberty (Aziz 2017:1). Some researchers have even defined youth as a hermeneutical experience as they experience God revealing himself to them (Aziz 2017:1; Counted 2016:1). Yet, the South African legislation broadly defines youth as those under the age of 35 (Aziz 2017:1). With this very broad definition of youth, one can understand that youth will inevitably be part of any organisation and thus qualify for sustainable leadership by being part of the community.

### The agency of youth

Apart from the inherent humanity of youth and the natural leadership influences that arise from their humanity, youth are also natural disruptors. Or in this case, youth have a natural agency to act and to make a difference in and to society. This is most evident in the various movements such as the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall within the South African context. Furthermore, in many emerging world economies, strategies for climate change, culture, and cultural influences are being decided and influenced by youth (Aziz 2020:2). The disruptive nature of youth also supports the philosophy that sustainable leadership thrives in uncertainties and where answers are not glibly provided to satisfy current leadership.

## Strategies for growing social capital for sustainable leadership

Wakahiu and Salvaterra (2012:158ff.) discuss at least two possible strategies for developing social capital for sustainable leadership, namely, collaborative projects and mentoring. A further strategy arising from the research by Nakagawa and Shaw (2004:10–16) and Wakahiu and Salvaterra (2012:159) is

networking. These strategies are discussed in the next section as these all are deemed appropriate strategies in line with the above discussion.

### Collaborative projects

Interestingly, Wakahiu and Salvaterra (2012:159ff.; cf. Swart 2017:224–231) argue that sustainable leadership is most sustainable through projects that are initiated by the ‘trainees’. When projects are initiated by followers or trainees, it often allows for a change of perspective and ‘an inner transformational journey to self-discovery’. Apart from projects encouraging shared responsibility and interaction, it also allows an individual to grow and change from their self-perceived shortcomings and weaknesses. In this case, it becomes an important practice to allow the youth to not only conceptualise projects but take the lead in such projects that have people involved from different life stages, genders, and perspectives. This takes into consideration the fact that the freedom, confidence, and idealism of the youth to conceptualise and lead projects are enforced and encouraged through bonding social capital and an environment of mutual trust and respect (Aziz 2019:141). Collaborative projects that are meaningful for the organisation and community can also encourage the youth to contribute to sustainable leadership.

### Mentoring

The basic understanding of mentoring alludes to a relationship between an older or more experienced person that journeys alongside someone who may not have all the desired experiences or knowledge. Some by-products of mentoring include self-confidence, personal and professional development, and friendships (Wakahiu & Salvaterra 2012:160). In this sense, any leadership competency can be filtered to another person through meaningful and effective mentoring and continue the cycle of sustainable leadership development. Powell and Clark (2011:93ff.), however, argue that mentorship in ecclesiastical settings was never meant to be something between two individuals. Instead, according to Powell and Clarke (2011:93ff.), mentoring is something that exists among a body or group of people. In this case, the church is a mentoring community. This definition by Powell and Clark (2011) resonates well with the generation and employment of social capital. Mentoring becomes meaningful in a group setting as relationships and meaning become solidified within specific contexts. Any mentor will also attest that they experience growth and meaning from the mentee, and thus mentorship is dialogical and beneficial for all those involved in the relationship. When the church partners with the youth through various mentorship programmes, the church, too, benefits. Mentoring is an important aspect of sustainable leadership but should not be short-changed by thinking that the youth have nothing to offer.

### Networking

Networking is an aspect that is derived from both Nakagawa and Shaw’s (2004:10–16) and Wakahiu and Salvaterra’s

(2012:159) studies. Networking is essential to sustainable leadership as skills and knowledge are created and transferred by people within organisations and communities. Networking is also a means to identify various resources that are essential to sustainable leadership. However, networking is not just about accessing resources but also contributing resources in the form of skills, knowledge, time, and worth. Through networking, the person is also validated and encouraged in leadership development. Furthermore, networking is a means to further validate and encourage social capital among people within the organisation. It also becomes myopic when the church leadership does not recognise the skills that youth contribute to the church and its future. This was evident during COVID-19 when the youth contributed significantly to the technological aspects of the church when movement and physical attendance were restricted (Aziz 2021:1–2; Pillay 2020:2). One can also imagine the contribution that youth will make to cultural skills where the social dynamics are ever evolving.

## Conclusion

There may be no better opportunity to discuss matters of leadership than during or after a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the ordinary lives of people require leadership that is not only sustainable for the survival of the organisation but one that looks at the well-being of the individual. This type of leadership should not only have the organisation at heart but every person within its reach. A practical theological approach is most useful as it reflects and acts on the praxis of a local context, in this case, leadership within a South African context. A shortcoming in this paper is the obvious lack of empirical data, which is suggested for future research in this subject area and can make a valuable contribution to practical theology, sustainable leadership, and youth ministry.

This paper sought to raise the understanding that through sustainable leadership everyone can surpass their limitations and weaknesses and contribute positively to not only the organisation but to society.

Furthermore, this paper discussed that by harnessing the youth through social capital, the leader can invest in the youth but also benefit from the youth to create a sustained legacy and future. Youth, being an ideal person for leadership has a natural affinity to change and perseverance but also a unique ability through their personhood to make a positive impact and change.

Finally, this paper has discussed that this type of change is possible through the implementation of collaborative projects where the youth is placed in a leadership position and allowed the freedom to coordinate the project as they deem necessary. Additionally, through mentoring, the leader can not only pass on essential skills and knowledge but also create a friendship and learn valuable lessons from the youth. Furthermore, mentoring has a wonderful opportunity to create self-confidence in the youth as they interact with

various people in the church community. Thirdly, through networking, the youth can create and sustain meaningful relationships where resources are not only available but also contribute to the overall discussion and programme as well as the future development of the organisation and people within the organisation.

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