



Christian Leadership in the Church, Education, and the Public Sphere: Reviewed from the Urgency of Character Renewal

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Abstract

This paper discusses the urgency of renewing the character of Christian leaders in churches, schools, and public spaces. This research was conducted through a literature review to explore the challenges faced by leaders as they age. It researched the importance of improving the character of educators as leaders, and explored the understanding of Tom Yeakley, N.T. Wright, Marvin Oxenham, and Andar Ismail on character formation. Based on a review of the literature, it is stated that Christian leaders bring the impact of their past personal formation into their duties and roles in ministry. It was also stated that the renewal of the character of Christian leaders in Indonesia is very necessary and that it has a theological, theoretical, and practical basis. The thoughts in this paper are expected to be beneficial for the church and Christian education.

Keywords: character, Christian leaders, church, education, Indonesia, public space

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Introduction

Leadership is a crucial factor in the success of religious organizations, where leaders play the role of directing, motivating, and empowering members to achieve common goals (Widodo & Langi, 2023). The phenomenon of Christian leadership, both locally and globally, shows a broad spectrum from leaders who manage to accomplish their tasks well to those who fail to present themselves as moral and spiritual examples. Failure of Christian leadership is often a stumbling block for many, creating a crisis of trust and faith in the community (Simatupang, 2020). In the Indonesian context, this challenge becomes increasingly complex given the strategic function of Christian leaders that not only impacts faith communities but also society at large.

Previous research has identified that Christian leadership has a significant influence on the loyalty, behaviour, and performance of religious organization administrators (Widodo & Langi, 2023). Other studies show that leadership based on Christian values – such as love, care for the poor and suffering – is a model that is expected to overcome leadership crises in the church. However, there is still a gap in understanding the dynamics of Christian leadership and its impact on aspects of loyalty, behaviour, and performance in a broader context (Widodo & Langi, 2023).

Christian leadership as a trans-disciplinary field of study has attracted the attention of academics, who combine theological studies with other disciplines such as Management, Psychology, and Sociology (Kessler & Kretzschmar, 2015). This approach allows for the development of more comprehensive and contextual leadership models. Practical Theology is a "theory of church leadership," which shows the close relationship between theological theory and leadership practice (Kessler & Kretzschmar, 2015). Nevertheless, there is still a need to integrate theological perspectives with empirical approaches in examining Christian leadership in the contemporary era.

The current era of disruption also brings new challenges as well as opportunities for Christian leaders to lead in an innovative and effective way (Topayung, 2024). An integrative model that combines spiritual intelligence, the use of artificial intelligence, and the optimization of human potential can provide a competitive advantage for Christian leadership (Topayung, 2024). However, there have not been many studies that have explored how this integration can be

applied in the context of Christian leadership in Indonesia, particularly in the three domains that this article focuses on: the church, education, and the public space.

Theoretically, this article is based on the understanding that character is the foundation of effective Christian leadership. As proposed by N.T. Wright (2010), there is a theological and biblical basis for the development of the character qualities of Christian leaders. Wright (2010) also proposes five ways to build character: studying the qualities of character in the Bible, listening to the life stories of biblical and church figures, living the life examples of role models, practicing character in everyday life, and praying and asking for community support. This approach is in line with Aristotle's (1962) view in *Nicomachean Ethics*, which emphasizes character building through education, teaching, practice, habituation, and support.

This study aims to explore relevant and effective models of Christian leadership in the context of the church, education, and public spaces in Indonesia. Relevant and effective leaders are those who have good character so that they become models and agents of renewal. The methods used are the literature review of Psychology, Character Education, and Christian Education. Starting from the literature review, the struggle of leaders along with the change in age is successively explained, along with the importance of improving the character of educators as leaders. Then the understanding of Tom Yeakley, N.T. Wright, Marvin Oxenham, and Andar Ismail on the character formation of Christian leaders will be explained and signified.

The Leader Changes and Struggles

Christian leaders face changes from within in response to external challenges, opportunities, and threats. Psychologically, leaders change as they age, or due to physiological weakening, and there are fewer opportunities to expand social reactions and efforts to increase insight (Sidjabat, 2024). A strenuous routine can make leaders less active in "seeking God's work and his truth" (Matt. 6:33) or in enjoying intimate fellowship with the Lord Jesus (Jn. 15:4,5, 14).

In summary, it can be stated that during adolescence and youth (13-22 years old), leaders struggled with the formation of self-image, so that they were steadily recognized and appreciated. Various roles were tried for that purpose (Newman & Newman, 2015, pp. 527-379; Santrock, 2011, pp. 354-417). In their early adulthood (23-40 years), leaders struggled to build a career and enrich the quality

of intimacy in their family, church, workplace, and community. However, it is not uncommon for leaders to feel isolated (avoided by many parties) because of the unfulfilled feeling of intimacy which may be caused by incompetency (Newman & Newman, 2015, pp. 427-479; Santrock, 2011, pp. 382-530).

In adolescence, leaders struggled to build their self-image and strengthen their self-identity. This process often involves exploring different roles for better self-recognition and self-esteem. Research shows that the development of leadership identities can be done through initiatives that increase confidence and resilience in young women, as well as skills such as decision-making and conflict management (Dixon et al., 2023). This process is important given that the experience and competencies gained in youth can form a positive evaluation of their leadership performance. In addition, family context and emotional experiences during adolescence contribute to a person's future leadership qualities and potential (Oliver et al., 2011).

In their early adulthood (23-40 years), leaders may face challenges in building careers and enriching intimate relationships in areas such as family, community, and workplace. At this stage, social interaction and the quality of relationships are becoming increasingly important, and many leaders feel isolated amid these demands. The findings suggest that this could be due to difficulties in managing time between career and personal life (Hoyland et al., 2021). Furthermore, in early adulthood, the quality of romantic relationships and social support from social networks also play an important role in an individual's mental health and well-being, which can affect their leadership capacity (Hoyland et al., 2021). However, various pressures, such as the challenges of social relationships and family dynamics, can trigger feelings of isolation among young leaders, indicating the need for stronger emotional and social support (Hoyland et al., 2021; Weitzman et al., 2017).

In their middle adulthood (40-60 years), leaders may struggle to develop competencies to be generative or fruitful in their work. If a leader plays the role of a lecturer, he must remain active and work hard in the three tasks of higher education (*tridharma*): teaching, research and publication, and social service. Changes in physical strength due to a lack of life balance are a challenge in themselves at this time. Not a few end up "looking for shortcuts" to meet the demands and face challenges that arise. In addition, the desire to receive

recognition can increase the emotional and mental burden of many leaders (Newman & Newman, 2015, pp. 481–525; Santrock, 2011, pp. 534–618).

In advanced adulthood (more than 60 years), leaders often try to defend themselves so that they are still judged by people as figures of integrity or according to words, beliefs, and deeds. Changes in physical strength and the arrival of retirement may affect their mental and emotional attitude. The presence of a replacement is not necessarily easy for senior leaders to accept. It may be that there is a feeling of rivalry, a sense of discomfort, because they will soon be removed (Newman & Newman, 2015, pp. 527–563). This is clearly a struggle of character such as wisdom or resilience.

Based on the various struggles described above, the issue of character in leadership should be discussed. Reasons and approaches for character formation in church, school, and public space is important to dealt with.

The Call for Character Formation in Higher Education

Tom Yeakley, a mission worker from *The Navigators* ministry, has long fostered prospective Christian leaders (students) in the campus world in Indonesia. Yeakley expressed the idea of the fundamentals of character in leadership in his *Character Formation for Leaders* (2013). According to him, there are four very basic qualities of character, namely: love, integrity, humility, and a spirit of servitude. Furthermore, there are six character qualities as supportive, namely: holiness, faith, generosity, self-mastery, pleasure to teach, and courage.

Yeakley's (2013) view is significant in the sense that Christian leaders should build their character qualities. Formation of Christian students during their study in higher education needs to be facilitated, for they will become leaders in society. This is because the quality of character enables leaders to realize the vision, mission, and values of personal life and the institutions they serve (Solikin et al., 2017). A leader who is weak or has a bad character becomes counterproductive to the ideals of the institution. This is detrimental to the people he works with, as they are unable to realize the expectations of the people they serve.

The importance of character formation in higher education in Indonesia has been stated in an academic manuscript of character education (*Naskah Akademik Pendidikan Karakter Di Perguruan Tinggi*, 2011). In the academic text, there are four characters that should grow and develop in lecturers and students, namely: honesty (trustworthy), intelligence (studious, critical, creative), toughness

(diligence, not easy to give up), and caring (sensitive, responsive, nurturing, paying attention). It seems that this hope has not been well realized, because it appears that several university leaders have to deal with the law because of corruption. Not a few students and lecturers are indicated to commit plagiarism or academic dishonesty, and the lack of a tough attitude or tenacity to work hard (Wibowo, 2012).

There is a saying that if the *teacher pees standing up, the student will pee running*. This can be true in Christian higher education that include theological and religious colleges. If lecturers and leaders display character qualities that are contrary to honesty, intelligence, toughness, and caring, then more or less their life example will be carried by students in the future, in the service of the church and the community served. One would ask: Which theological and religious college alumni are they from? Of course, the quality of character of graduates of Christian theological and religious colleges is not only determined by the few years of educational process they have experienced. This is because there are many other factors, including the outcome of parenting in the family of origin, the influence of the close environment, coaching in the church, education in primary and secondary schools, and the role models of influential people both in real and digital society (MacIntyre, 1981; Sidjabat, 2021). However, as stated by Oxenham (2019), lecturers and leaders in theological and religious colleges should pay attention to character transformation, because in the future they will become leaders and role models in the family, church, and society. Intensive teaching of character and the development of academy of character, according to Oxenham, can meet the need.

Theological Basis for Character Formation

There is a theological and biblical basis for the development of Christian character qualities. Wright (2010) stated that the New Testament invites those who read and study it to deepen faith in the Triune God, which is faith that must bring transformation in daily life. According to Wright, once people repent and acknowledge the Lord Jesus the Savior, God assigns or sends them as "the salt and light of the world" (Matt. 5:13-17). The Lord Jesus wanted them to keep a real faith in Him, not to be replaced by the promotion of work or service (Matt. 7:21-23).

N.T. Wright (2010) proposes that citizens and church leaders can build their character qualities with five means and activities. First, to learn the qualities

of character in Bible teaching. For example, what does the Bible teach about honesty, humility, toughness, love, caring, and trustworthiness? Second, to study the life stories of Bible figures and church leaders of the past and leaders of today. Third, to observe the life examples of people who are appropriate as models, how they overcome life's struggles to complete their tasks and vocations in life. Fourth, learning to present and build up character qualities in daily life with consistency, for example to practice honesty and critical mind. Fifth, to pray for God's guidance and strength, and to ask for the support of community prayer in the family, small fellowship, or friends in the workplace environment.

It seems that N.T. Wright's (2010) proposal is very practical. The strategy of character building through education, teaching, practice, habituation, and support is actually the idea of Aristotle (384-322 BC) in *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1962). However, Wright is distinctive because he emphasizes the importance of the teaching of the Bible, Christian stories and models, and the roles of prayer, fellowship and community support in character formation.

Oxenham (2019) also views that character formation in theological colleges as proposed by Aristotle can be applied. He particularly proposes the importance of characters of courage, temperance, liberty, magnificence, nobility, generosity, ambition, passion, pride, patience, friendliness, truthfulness, humour, joy, modesty, and justice. Oxenham elaborated on the meaning of all the characters based on a study of the Bible.

Educating Leaders through Literature

In the Indonesian context, Andar Ismail (1940-2024) has left behind a legacy of teaching faith and Christian character in life, through his popular writing or devotional books called *Seri Selamat*. He utilizes Christian practices and adult life tasks to construct 33 books that voice faith, salvation, and hope from Christ. Adults can learn from *Seri Selamat* about celebrating Christmas and Easter, prayer, family life, discipleship, teaching and education, work, worship, faith, witness, peace, spirituality, healing, relationship, multiculturalism, faith community, Bible reading, life struggle, unity in Christ, fruitful life, commitment, self-renewal, identity, nationalism, life quality, wisdom, and self-actualization. All learning materials are intended to guide adults in finding and realizing God's shalom or *selamat* in their roles as parents, leaders in church, teachers, workers, or managers in the workplace, and in many other responsibilities in society.

For example, in *Selamat Melayani* (1996) Andar presents wise reflections on the quality of character in ecclesiastical ministry, such as being honest, willing to sacrifice, and diligent in study. In *Selamat Menabur* (1997), various writings are presented for teachers or educators. They are to observe compassion, hospitality and intelligence of Jesus the Teacher as portrayed in the gospels. In *Selamat Berkarya* (1998), Andar provides his reflections on ethics, morals, and character to equip church members when they play the role of employees or leaders in the marketplace. They are motivated for hard work and trustworthiness. In *Selamat Berbuah* (2015), it is stated that a dynamic life with the Lord Jesus has an impact on a fruitful life. In *Selamat Bercinta* (2016), he points out that commitment to work is an important key for Christians if they want to bring a positive influence in community. In *Selamat Berhikmat* (2021), Andar invites church members and Christian leaders to always learn the character of wisdom from the Bible and from example of figures in society. In *Selamat Berguna* (2022), it is stated that every church member and Christian leader should make their lives useful for their families, churches, and communities. For Andar, the duties and vocations of life are self-actualization, but they must bring benefits to the people and glorify God.

One of the valuable lessons from the work of the former Christian Education lecturer at the Jakarta Theological Seminary and Pastor Emeritus at the Gereja Kristen Indonesia, is his presentation of selected Christian leaders in the public world, theological education, and the church. For example, Andar Ismail invites readers to understand the quality of work of Christian public leaders such as Dr. Eka Darmaputera, pastor and social ethics writer (Ismail, 2006, Chapter 12); Dr. Johanes Leimena, trustworthy minister of President Sukarno (Ismail, 2008, Chapter 21); Frans Seda, respected national economist by Presidents Sukarno and Suharto (Ismail, 2011, Chapter 19); Ahok, the former Governor of Jakarta, and Yap Thiam Hien, a highly respected lawyer in the country (Ismail, 2014, Chapters 23, 32); J. Verkuyl, professor of Ethics and founder of Christian Publishing House, Badan Penerbit Kristen (Ismail, 2015, Chapter 30); and Dr. Singgih D. Gunarsa, former professor of Psychology at the University of Indonesia (Ismail, 2016, Chapter 23).

From the leaders in the church organization, Andar Ismail motivated readers of *Seri Selamat* to learn from Rev. Dr. Fridolin Ukur and Frans Tumiwa (Ismail, 2009, Chapters 6, 28). From theologians and leaders of church organizations, Andar invites readers to listen to the life examples and works of

Dr. Sularso Sopater and Dr. Peter Latuihamallo (Ismail, 2010, Chapters 15, 19), and Dr. Dorothy I. Marx (Ismail, 2018, Chapter 17). The legacy of the life values of Todung Sutan Gunung Mulia, Amir Sjarifuddin, Martha Christina Tiahahu, N. Driyarkara, and Clement Suleeman (Ismail, 2019, Chapters 4, 7, 14, 26, 27-28) was also creatively presented.

So, through Andar Ismail's writings, Christian educators and leaders can learn how important it is to listen to the examples of those whose lives and works have contributed to and in this society and nation. Readers of *Seri Selamat* are also challenged to appreciate leaders around them, including those outside the church environment. Therefore, Andar Ismail presents insightful information about Gus Dur, Max Havelaar, and R.A. Kartini (Ismail, 2011, Chapters 8, 15, 21), Alexander the Great (Ismail, 2010, Chapter 16), and President Sukarno (Ismail, 2016, Chapter 17).

Andar Ismail also sees the significance of valuable lessons from reformist figures – Martin Luther, John Calvin – and counter-reform figure, Ignatius Loyola (Ismail, 2017). Their works, thoughts, and life examples (character qualities) are considered useful for Christian leaders in Indonesia. It was emphasized that, from the reformers of the past, leaders in the country should be committed to self-renewal, the development of attitudes and mindsets to be relevant to the context of a pluralistic society.

It is worth mentioning that Andar Ismail also secretly made himself an example for readers of *Seri Selamat*. He wrote many life stories about his struggles in schools, Bible seminary, church and teaching ministries, and in the writing of *Seri Selamat*. Andar Ismail also wrote his concern about the moral deterioration of the church leadership and the government (Sidjabat, 2018). His consistent hard work to write until the age of 84 conveyed a message of faith and the quality of a faithful, scholarly, and noble-hearted character to carry out the task believed to be given by Christ. After completing the writing of *Seri Selamat* (1981-1982, 1992-2022), Andar Ismail has still presented *Tukang Ngantar Selamat* (2023), to humbly explain his mission from the Lord to convey messages of *selamat*; and *Tukang Cerita Selamat* (2024), to describe his joy in telling stories of *selamat* from Christ.

The above explanation suggests that Andar Ismail contributed valuable thinking on how Christian leadership with integrity should be presented by church leaders, educators in the context of schools and colleges, and in the role of leaders in the community. He himself has in disguise left a legacy of Christian

leader, writer, pastor and teacher, and public figure with a strong spirituality and exemplary character. Therefore, continuous renewal and character development should be an important concern for Christian leaders to bring about impactful lives and works. To that end, they can learn from the Bible, from quality spiritual and moral reflections, and from the living examples of their predecessors.

Our Task Now

In today's global and digital era, churches and public spaces in Indonesia long for the presence of Christian leaders with good character qualities. Efforts to improve knowledge, strategies, and leadership techniques are very important, linked to the enrichment of spirituality that improves the quality of character as exemplified by the Lord Jesus Christ. In this regard, George Barna's (2006) thoughts on leadership are very interesting and significant. It is affirmed that if people want to be Christian leaders who bring renewal, their first calling is to repent (turn to Christ) and walk behind the Lord Jesus (Matt. 4:19), and faithfully come and learn from Him (Matt. 11:28-30) based on careful study of the Gospels. The Lord Jesus, who has made disciples into fishers of men, will also make today's followers who come and learn from Him into transformational Christian leaders.

Regarding the importance of continuously being sensitive to the renewal of character qualities for leaders, this matter has been raised by Sidjabat (2021) in his *Membangun Pribadi Unggul*. As stated by Maurice Wagner (1988) in *Sensation of Being Some Body* and Mary Guindon (2010) in *Self-Esteem Across the Lifespan*, unfinished self-esteem and acceptance (low, bad) will have a profound impact on the lives and performance of leaders. Because of seeking of recognition and self-recognition, not a few leaders make their duties a show of power. Such leaders are certainly closed to suggestions and criticism, and do not do self-reflection.

Therefore, improving acceptance and self-esteem is very important for educators who also play the role of Christian leaders in theological colleges and public spaces (Sidjabat, 2021, Chapters 3, 4). The quality of honest, intelligent, tough, caring, disciplined, and self-mastery character will develop better in the life of leaders where their recognition, acceptance, and appreciation are positive. Leaders who are "done with themselves" will be more effective, creative, and relevant in fulfilling their life calling and responsibilities. The work of God the Father (His love), the wisdom of the Lord Jesus, and renewal by the Holy Spirit,

as well as the support of mentors and colleagues, are jointly necessary in the renewal of the character of leaders.

Implications and Recommendations

The above explanation raises implications about how important it is for churches, public and Christian religious colleges to pay attention to the development and strengthening of the character of leaders and educators in theological colleges. With this effort, church leaders will be motivated to equip members of their congregation to become leaders with Christlike character and to bring the sacrament into their families and workplaces. If teachers and education staffs get equipment for character renewal and strengthening, it is hoped that they will become role models for students who, after completing their studies, will become leaders with a positive impact on society.

In line with that commitment, further research on leadership and character based on biblical and theological studies can be proposed. Biographical studies of public and Christian leaders in the country who have a good reputation can also enrich the understanding of church leaders, teachers and students in theological colleges. The influence of cultural values and social dynamics in pluralistic society of Indonesia, that affects the formation and development of leaders' characters, should also be explored. This is because the development of character of leaders is influenced by the heritage of cultural values and habits of attitude and behaviour that are rooted in their families and communities.

Conclusion

Based on the above description, it can be stated that Christian leaders experience changes in their mindset, attitudes, and deeds, along with the development of their age. The crisis experienced by leaders in adolescence can affect their character if there is no good improvement. The formation and renewal of the character of Christian leaders in schools, colleges, churches, and public spaces is urgently needed. It is hoped that they will become an example of honesty, intelligence, resilience, and care in the community. There is a biblical foundation for the development of a leader's character. In addition, there are thoughts on creative strategies that can be learned and applied.

Theological educators who equip students to become preachers of the Gospel through word and deed are no exception to the call for character

leadership development. Theology educators are not only function as teachers, researchers, and writers of theological scientific works, but also as companions for the growth of spirituality and student leadership competence. Thus, it is hoped that the students will become quality leaders in the midst of the church and the pluralistic Indonesian society.

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