

Developing Leaders of Christ-like Character: Insights from the Fourth Lausanne Congress

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Abstract

The Fourth Lausanne Congress, held in Seoul last September, brought together Christian leaders worldwide to strategize on evangelism, discipleship, and leadership development. One of the key focal points for the week was the track, “Developing Leaders of Character.” This article provides an analysis of the track, which spanned four days, each day dedicated to a distinct theme: listening, imagining, creating, and communicating. Drawing from biblical principles, participant insights, and existing theological discourse, this article emphasizes the theological foundations, practical strategies, and systemic changes required to cultivate leaders who embody Christ-like character, integrity, and a commitment to the Great Commission.

Key Words: character formation, integrity, Lausanne Movement, leadership development, discipleship

Introduction

In an era marked by profound social, economic, and moral complexities, the Church faces an urgent need for leaders who exemplify Christ-like character. Leadership deficiencies rooted in moral lapses, accountability failures, and superficial discipleship have hindered the Church’s witness in many contexts. The Lausanne Movement—a leading global network of evangelical leaders—has long emphasized the importance of character and discipleship in the development of leadership.

Leading up to Seoul 2024, the Lausanne Movement hosted a series of “Listening Calls” to discern key gaps in the advance of the Great Commission. They identified 40 key gaps and chose 25 of them to focus on during the congress. Each afternoon at Seoul 2024, a few hours were set aside for these tracks to address these issues. The number one gap identified was to strengthen Disciple-Making. Furthermore, in that gap developing leaders with Christ-like Character was needing critical attention.

Therefore, the “Developing Leaders of Christ-like Character” track at the Fourth Lausanne Congress sought to address this pressing leadership issue by exploring the theological and practical dimensions of character formation. This article examines the discussions and strategies articulated during the congress track, drawing upon theological frameworks of the *imago Dei*, sanctification, and servant leadership. Additionally, it integrates insights from mission leaders to propose actionable pathways for cultivating Christ-like leaders who can faithfully respond to the challenges in today’s everchanging world.

Theological Foundations of Character-Driven Leadership

The Imago Dei and Leadership

Christian leadership must be understood in light of the *imago Dei*—the belief that humanity is created in the image of God. As Beck and Demarest assert, “The implications of human persons created in the image of God are immense for theology, psychology, ministry, and Christian living.

Ramifications of the *imago Dei* embrace issues of human dignity and value, personal and social ethics, relations between sexes, the solidarity of the human family ... and racial justice” (Beck & Demarest 2005, 131). The divine image-bearing trait of both leaders and those they serve demands that leaders reflect God’s character in their lives and ministries, embodying qualities such as love, justice, humility, and integrity.

The relational aspect of the *imago Dei* further underscores the necessity of Christ-like leadership. Simango et al. argue, “To be created in the image and likeness of God means to be created as God’s children.... This relational identity calls leaders to foster unity and community within their spheres of influence” (Simango et al. 2025). Leadership that mirrors the relational nature of God is not authoritarian but collaborative, prioritizing relationships over results (Handley 2022).

Sanctification and the Call to Christ-likeness

The process of sanctification—the believer’s journey toward becoming more like Christ—is central to character formation. As Simango et al. note, “Sanctification is the process by which the believer becomes conformed to the image of Christ... the Holy Spirit acts as the transforming agent” (Simango et al. 2025). This character forming adventure challenges leaders to pursue ongoing spiritual growth, marked by humility, self-denial, and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

The ethical implications of sanctification are profound. Leaders are called to exhibit integrity, transparency, and moral courage, standing as “witnesses” to God’s transformative power (Kohl et al. 2024). This commitment to moral and spiritual excellence is particularly critical in a world where leadership failures have often undermined the credibility of the Church.

Servant Leadership: The Model of Christ

Jesus Christ’s model of servant leadership provides the ultimate paradigm for Christian leaders. As articulated in Matthew 20:25–28, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” This call to servanthood challenges contemporary leadership norms that prioritize power and prestige. Instead, it invites leaders to embody humility, sacrificial love, and a commitment to the flourishing of others (Bennett et al. 2005, 19).

Day 1: Listening to the Current Reality

Identifying the Leadership Gap

The afternoon track began with an honest appraisal of the “current reality” in leadership, emphasizing the disconnect between ideal leadership and lived practice. Participants highlighted several root causes of this gap:

- **Cultural Pressures:** Leaders often face societal temptations such as the pursuit of power, recognition, and wealth, which distort their priorities.
- **Organizational Barriers:** Hierarchical structures frequently inhibit mentorship and accountability, sidelining character formation.
- **Accountability Deficits:** The absence of robust accountability mechanisms leaves leaders vulnerable to moral and ethical failures.

These challenges resonate with broader critiques of leadership within the church. As the Pattaya Occasional Paper observes, “Too often leaders underestimate the power of sin and the strength of sinful tendencies in their own lives” (Bennett et al. 2005, 10).

Consequences of Character Deficiencies

“Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but
he who makes his ways crooked will be found out” (Proverbs 10:9).

The consequences of deficient character formation are far-reaching, resulting in broken relationships, diminished trust, and weakened witness. Participants noted that these failures often stem from a results-oriented culture that prioritizes productivity over relational depth. Salinas critiques this utilitarian mindset, warning that “The church has let the world convince her that the criterion to define the value of life is its utility, its capacity to produce” (Salinas 2010, 86).

This recognition of the damaging effects of character deficiencies is not limited to the spiritual space alone. Even journals like the *Harvard Business Review* share similar perspectives, emphasizing that self-regulation and empathy are among the most critical traits for effective leadership (Goleman 1998).

In light of these reflections, it is clear that addressing the leadership gap requires a holistic reorientation of priorities—one that values character formation as foundational to effective leadership. Participants called for a renewed commitment to cultivating integrity, accountability, and relational depth, recognizing that these are not merely peripheral traits but essential qualities that sustain both individual leaders and the communities they serve. The journey toward Christlike leadership demands courage to resist cultural pressures, intentionality in reshaping organizational norms, and humility to embrace accountability. Only by anchoring leadership in these principles can the church hope to bridge the gap between ideals and lived practice, offering a witness marked by authenticity and faithfulness.

Day 2: Imagining a Vision for Character-Driven Leadership

A Holistic Vision for Leadership

On the second day, participants articulated a vision for leadership rooted in Christ-like character. Key components of this vision included:

- **Relational Discipleship:** Emphasizing the importance of building “communities of disciples” that foster spiritual growth and accountability (Adeleye et al., *Seven Challenges for the Global Evangelical Outreach*).
- **Workplace Ministry:** Encouraging leaders to integrate faith into their daily lives, thereby modeling character-driven leadership in secular contexts.
- **Intergenerational Mentorship:** Recognizing the necessity of “delegating authority to younger leaders” and equipping them for meaningful contributions (Adeleye et al. 2024).

In an article leading up to the congress, De Visser and Handley address this vision, especially for the next generation, noting, “To a generation that is starving for human connection, the greatest gift the church can offer is relationship.” They also highlight Jesus’s holistic approach to discipleship as key to the process: “Jesus was intentional about providing meaningful relationship

and spiritual guidance to his disciples. Particularly with Peter, James, and John, Jesus invited them to experience his ministry and the power of God at work through him” (De Visser & Handley 2023). By prioritizing relationships and modeling Christ-like character, leaders can inspire others to pursue their spiritual growth and embrace their calling.

In addition to the afternoon session, the plenary on “Servant Leadership” by Philip Ryken laid out the vital importance of relationships and the call to servanthood. This emphasis highlighted the importance of the address by Chris Wright from Cape Town 2010 encouraging leaders to focus on humility, integrity, and simplicity (Wright 2010).

This vision for character-driven leadership calls the Church to embody a transformative model of discipleship and mentorship that reflects the heart of Christ. By prioritizing relationships, fostering intergenerational mentorship, and integrating faith into daily life, leaders can inspire a new generation to embrace their calling with humility and integrity. As Ryken underscored, servant leadership is not a strategy but a posture of the heart—one rooted in humility, simplicity, and a commitment to serve others (Ryken 2024). This vision challenges leaders to resist the allure of power and prestige, instead embracing the call to cultivate communities marked by Christ-like character. In doing so, the church can offer a compelling witness to the world, pointing to the redemptive power of the gospel in every sphere of life.

Day 3: Creating Pathways for Leadership Development

Practical Strategies for Character Formation

Participants identified several pathways for cultivating Christ-like leaders on our third day together:

- **Mentorship and Succession Planning:** Intentional mentorship programs were highlighted as vital for equipping the next generation of leaders. The Congress echoed the call to “bless emerging leaders by calling out their gifts” and providing opportunities for growth (Atallah et al. 2023).
- **Accountability Systems:** Establishing clear structures of accountability ensures that leaders are held to high ethical and spiritual standards. As Kohl et al. emphasize, “A person of integrity... is moral in character, ethical in action, truthful in dealings, and accountable at all times...” (Kohl et al. 2024, 138-139).
- **Spiritual Disciplines:** Leadership formation must prioritize prayer, Scripture engagement, and other disciplines that deepen intimacy with God. “Intimacy with God... must be the primary focus of the leader’s life” (Bennett et al. 2005, 18).

Daniel Goleman highlights these reflective approaches in his look at leadership, noting the importance of self-reflection and feedback (Goleman 1998). Asia Williamson has prepared a number of helpful resources in spiritual formation that help provide a roadmap that can enhance the relational dimensions of disciple-making and character formation (Williamson n.d.). By providing practical guidance, these resources equip leaders with frameworks to grow in their walk with Christ and to foster meaningful discipleship relationships. Through these integrated strategies—mentorship, accountability, spiritual disciplines, and resource utilization—leaders can strengthen their Christ-like character and integrity in their lives and ministries.

The development of Christ-like leaders requires intentionality, structure, and spiritual grounding. By prioritizing mentorship and succession planning, leaders can nurture emerging

voices and create a legacy of faithfulness. Robust accountability systems safeguard integrity, ensuring leaders reflect the ethical and spiritual values they proclaim. Spiritual disciplines anchor leaders in their relationship with God, fostering the depth and resilience needed to navigate the complexities of leadership. When combined with practical tools like those highlighted by Asia Williamson, these pathways offer a comprehensive framework for character formation. Together, these strategies not only equip leaders to grow in Christ-like integrity but also empower them to disciple others, creating a ripple effect that strengthens the church and its witness to the world.

Day 4: Communicating the Vision of Character-Driven Leadership

Contextualizing Leadership Formation

The Developing Leaders of Character track concluded with a focus on contextualizing leadership training to diverse cultural and regional settings. Participants emphasized the importance of:

- **Cultural Relevance:** Ensuring that leadership practices resonate with local contexts while remaining faithful to biblical principles. As Adeleye et al. note, “The main point of contextualization is to make the gospel proclamation clear and relevant... while guarding against syncretism” (Adeleye et al. 2024).
- **Collaboration and Innovation:** Partnering with seminaries, community organizations, and other ministries to develop robust leadership programs.
- **Prayerful Action:** Recognizing that spiritual renewal and transformation are foundational to any leadership initiative. “Revival and revitalization come through prayer,” as evidenced by movements in Sarawak and beyond (Adeleye et al. 2023).

Gideon Para-Mallam captures this contextuality in his article addressing Adaptive Leadership, “[Adaptive Leaders need] quality character [to] persevere through the storms in a positive and courageous manner. This demands firmness of character... [It also requires] *emotional intelligence*, leaders who understand and effectively manage their emotions and those of others through building healthy relationships based on trust.” (Para-Mallam 2024) By integrating cultural sensitivity, collaborative innovation, prayerful dependence, and emotional intelligence, leaders can create a framework for communicating and embodying the vision of character-based leadership.

Communicating the vision of character-based leadership requires a holistic approach that bridges biblical principles with cultural sensitivity. By contextualizing leadership formation to resonate with diverse settings, leaders can ensure the gospel's relevance without compromising its integrity. Collaborative innovation with seminaries, ministries, and local organizations fosters a unified effort to equip leaders for today's challenges. Rooting these initiatives in prayer underscores the dependence on God's guidance and power for true transformation. As Para-Mallam highlights, adaptive leaders must embody emotional intelligence and perseverance, building trust and navigating complexities with courage and grace. Together, these elements create a compelling framework for leaders to not only articulate their vision but to live it out, inspiring others to follow Christ with integrity and purpose.

Conclusion

The “Developing Leaders of Character” track at the Fourth Lausanne Congress provided a compelling framework for cultivating Christ-like leaders who can navigate the complexities of our society today. By grounding leadership in the imago Dei, sanctification, and servant leadership,

the track affirmed that character formation is not ancillary but central to the Church's mission. We, the content specialists in the track, also know that this is not solely for the Christian or religious sphere. These issues align with critiques like those in business management literature, which underscore the dangers of results-oriented cultures that neglect relational depth (Seidman 2014).

The track highlighted theological foundations, practical strategies, and systemic changes necessary for fostering leaders of integrity, humility, and compassion. As churches and Christian organizations commit to this vision, they will be better positioned to inspire a new generation of leaders who will embody the gospel in every sphere of society. Through prayer, collaboration, and intentional discipleship, churches around the world can rise to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow with faithfulness and courage.

Key to addressing this issue though will be far more than just this one-week intensive and this overview. Several signed up to lead Collaborative Action Teams to address the issue. The Lausanne Movement Leadership Development Issue Network is forming a plan to focus on this issue throughout 2025 with webinars and at least one in-person gathering to help the mission community grow for the mission of God in the world today.

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