

From Authority to Service: Kenotic Leadership Pedagogy in Jesus' Ministry and Its Implications for Christian Religious Education

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Abstract: This study examines Jesus' leadership through the lens of *kenosis* (Philippians 2:5–11) and develops its implications for Christian Religious Education (CRE), focusing on the paradigm shift from authority-based to service-based leadership. The problem addressed is a leadership crisis marked by hierarchical, less formative patterns of authority in educational and religious institutions. Using a theological-qualitative approach, the study analyzes biblical texts—primarily Philippians 2:5–11, the Synoptic Gospels, and John 13 through a three-stage hermeneutical-theological method: analysis of the biblical texts, theological synthesis with Christian leadership literature, and critical reflection on the implications for CRE practice. The findings show that *kenosis* constitutes a formative leadership paradigm built on four interrelated characteristics: humility, relationality, exemplarity, and transformative orientation which this study extends beyond their established theological meaning by grounding them concretely in the teacher-student relationship as the primary site of Christian formation, a dimension underexplored in prior, largely clergy-focused *kenosis* scholarship. Jesus' leadership is thus understood as a process of character and relational formation rather than an exercise of authoritative function. Theoretically, the study contributes to Christian leadership studies by articulating kenotic leadership pedagogy, an educational approach in which formation rather than the transfer of information is the primary pedagogical goal. Practically, it recommends reorienting the CRE curriculum toward reflective, participatory, and character-forming learning designs. These findings clarify how the formative-pedagogical dimension of *kenosis*, and not only its ethical or theological dimension, can reshape the practice of Christian Religious Education.

Keywords: Kenosis; Kenotic Leadership; Jesus' Leadership; Servant Leadership; Christian Religious Education; Formative Pedagogy

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1. Introduction

In the current global context, the issue of leadership is under critical scrutiny amid increasing cases of abuse of authority, crises of integrity, and the weakening of ethical dimensions in various institutions, including educational and religious institutions.



Recent scholarship shows that leadership models which emphasize structural power and hierarchical control tend to fail to build healthy and transformative relationships within communities.¹ This phenomenon has prompted the search for alternative leadership paradigms that are more humanistic, relational, and service-oriented.

In Christian tradition, the figure of Jesus Christ appears as a unique and paradoxical model of leadership. His leadership was not built on domination or the legitimacy of power, but rather on the act of kenosis, or self-emptying, as formulated in Philippians 2:5-11. Leontaris asserts that kenosis is the foundation of Christian moral identity and leadership wisdom, which combines humility, obedience, and self-sacrifice.² This concept becomes increasingly relevant when churches and Christian educational institutions are faced with demands for ethical and contextual leadership, a demand articulated forcefully in recent kenotic social-ethics scholarship.³

A number of empirical studies show that servant leadership and humility have a positive impact on character building, social cohesion, and organizational sustainability. Peltz and Wilson found that kenotic leadership strengthens the relational and moral dimensions in faith-based organizations and encourages more inclusive participation.⁴ Nyland also showed that the kenotic leadership model contributes to leadership practices oriented towards social justice and community empowerment.⁵

In the field of education, especially Christian Religious Education, leadership plays a strategic role in shaping the values, attitudes, and life orientation of students. Reeves emphasizes that internalizing Jesus' leadership as a servant in the process of faith education encourages transformative learning centered on the formation of Christian character.⁶ However, the practice of Christian Religious Education still tends to be

¹ Hlulani Mdingi, "Who, Being in the Form of God, Did Not Consider It Robbery to Be Equal with God: Kenosis of Leadership," *HTS: Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (February 2020): 1-8, doi:10.4102/hts.v76i2.5844; Segun Ayotunde Olulowo, Fortunatus Godwin Ponttifex Alabi, and Oluwasola Israel Adedeji, "Divine Humility in Christ: A Christological Study of Jesus Christ as Servant and Its Implications for Contemporary Church Leadership," *International Journal of Religions and Peacebuilding (INJOREP)* 2, no. 3 (December 17, 2025), doi:10.5281/zenodo.17961575.

² Joanna Leontaris, "Christian Identity of Moral Wisdom, Paradoxical Servitude, and Resonating Kenosis," 2020.

³ R. P. Wilson, "Kenotic Social Ethics for a Better World" (doctoral dissertation, University of Innsbruck, 2025).

⁴ David P. Peltz and John H. Wilson, *True Leadership: Leadership Styles and the Kenotic Relationship* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2020).

⁵ Amy L. Nyland, "Kenotic Leadership: A Model for Clergy - ProQuest," 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/770ec9f0a6915c5f77cde672c3c9d9d8/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

⁶ Daniel Reeves, "Biblical Based Servant Leadership and the Liberian Methodist Church: Lessons from the Christological Hymn in Phil. 2:7-11," *Doctor of Ministry Projects and Theses*, November 12, 2022, https://scholar.smu.edu/theology_ministry_etds/21.

instructional and authoritative in contexts with a strong catechetical or clergy-centered heritage, such as the Liberian Methodist Church setting Reeves examines, thus potentially neglecting the dimensions of role modeling and relationships.⁷

Previous studies for the period 2020-2025 show significant developments in kenotic leadership studies, and read together they reveal both convergence and an important gap. Mdingi examines *kenosis* as a paradigm of Christian leadership ethics⁸; Nyland develops a kenotic leadership model for clergy⁹; Reeves examines Philippians 2 as the basis for servant leadership¹⁰; Olulowo et al. relate Christ's divine humility to contemporary church leadership¹¹; and Wilson extends the concept of *kenosis* into global social ethics.¹² Despite differing in context from clergy formation to social ethics these studies converge in treating *kenosis* as a normative-theological corrective to power-centered leadership. Where they diverge is in application: none moves from this shared normative claim to a sustained account of how kenotic leadership is learned or taught, which is precisely the gap this study addresses.

However, there are significant limitations in previous studies. First, most studies focus on the context of ecclesiastical or clerical leadership and have not explored the implications of kenotic leadership in formal Christian Religious Education. Second, existing studies tend to be normative-theological and do not sufficiently explore the meaning, experience, and implementation process of kenotic leadership in pedagogical relationships. Third, the perspective of Christian Religious Education teachers as learning leaders who embody *kenosis* is still relatively neglected.

From a social and cultural perspective, research on Jesus' leadership in the *kenosis* perspective is important because education plays a strategic role in shaping the leadership patterns of future generations. In a competitive and achievement-oriented culture, the kenotic paradigm offers a counter-cultural approach that emphasizes empathy, solidarity, and service. Theoretically, this approach is in line with *servant leadership* and transformational leadership theories, but is deepened by its distinctive Christological foundation.¹³

Based on this background, this study aims to examine Jesus' leadership from the perspective of *kenosis* and analyze its implications for Christian Religious Education. The focus of the study is directed at the paradigm shift from authority to service in the context

⁷ Reeves, "Biblical Based Servant Leadership and the Liberian Methodist Church."

⁸ Mdingi, "Who, Being in the Form of God, Did Not Consider It Robbery to Be Equal with God."

⁹ Nyland, "Kenotic Leadership."

¹⁰ Reeves, "Biblical Based Servant Leadership and the Liberian Methodist Church."

¹¹ Olulowo, Alabi, and Adedeji, "Divine Humility in Christ."

¹² R. P. Wilson, "Kenotic Social Ethics for a Better World."

¹³ David P. Peltz and John H. Wilson, *True Leadership: Leadership Styles and the Kenotic Relationship* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2020).

of Christian Religious Education. This study is expected to provide theoretical contributions in the form of enriching the study of kenosis-based Christian leadership, as well as practical contributions for Christian Religious Education teachers in designing and implementing transformative, relational learning practices rooted in the example of Christ.

Thus, this article departs from the thesis argument that Jesus' leadership, rooted in the principle of kenosis, not only has theological significance but also offers a pedagogical paradigm relevant to contemporary Christian Religious Education practices. Kenotic leadership places humility, service, and relationships at the core of the faith learning process, thereby transforming the role of educators from mere conveyors of doctrine to role models who shape the Christian character of students. Therefore, this study emphasizes that the integration of the kenotic leadership paradigm in Christian Religious Education is an important approach to building a more humanistic, reflective, and transformative educational practice amid the challenges of an educational culture that still tends to be hierarchical and instructional.

2. Research Method

This study uses a theological qualitative approach with an interpretive biblical-theological study design, which aims to explore the meaning, patterns, and implications of Jesus' leadership in the perspective of kenosis and its relevance to Christian Religious Education. A qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this study is not on measuring variables or statistical generalizations, but rather on a deep understanding of the biblical text, theological constructs, and the normative meanings contained therein. In the tradition of theological and biblical research, this approach is commonly used to interpret the Holy Scriptures contextually and reflectively, taking into account historical, literary, and theological dimensions, and it follows the qualitative practical-theology procedures set out by Swinton and Mowat as well as the hermeneutical framework of Thiselton.¹⁴

Data collection techniques were carried out through systematic and critical library research. Primary sources consisted of biblical texts, specifically Philippians 2:5-11, the Synoptic Gospels, and the Gospel of John, which contain narratives and teachings of Jesus about service and humility. Secondary sources were obtained from theology books, biblical interpretations, and reputable international journal articles (2020-2025) discussing kenosis, Jesus' leadership, *servant leadership*, and Christian Religious Education. The terms "primary" and "secondary" are used here in the sense of primary

¹⁴ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016); Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

and secondary sources, following standard usage in biblical-hermeneutical research, rather than the “data” terminology of empirical social science. The data collection process was carried out by searching academic databases such as the ATLA Religion Database, Google Scholar, and international theological journal publishers to ensure the relevance and recency of the sources.

Analysis of the sources was conducted using hermeneutical-theological analysis, which included three main stages that together generate the study’s findings: (1) close analysis of the biblical texts to identify the concept of kenosis and Jesus’ leadership patterns, which grounds the study’s exegetical claims; (2) theological synthesis, in which these biblical findings are read alongside Christian leadership theory and *servant leadership* scholarship to identify points of convergence and distinctiveness; and (3) critical reflection on the implications of these findings for Christian Religious Education practice, from which the study’s pedagogical proposals are derived. To maintain scientific accuracy and allow for limited replication, this study uses transparent analysis steps, explicit text references, and critical dialogue with contemporary theological literature, in accordance with the standards of biblical research methodology and systematic theology.¹⁵

In the process of writing and editing, this study made limited use of artificial intelligence (AI) technology at the language-polishing stage only, after the full analysis, argumentation, and conceptual construction had already been completed independently by the researcher. Two AI editing applications were used, Grammarly and QuillBot, for surface-level paraphrasing of already-drafted sentences and grammatical refinement. Concretely, this meant using the tools to improve sentence clarity, word choice, and syntactic flow, while every AI-suggested change was manually reviewed and accepted or rejected by the researcher against the original theological argument, so that no citation, biblical reference, or substantive claim was generated, altered, or removed by the AI tools. The use of AI is therefore positioned strictly as a technical language-support tool, not as a generator of ideas or content, so that academic integrity is maintained in accordance with scientific publication ethics.¹⁶ With this detailed and transparent methodological approach, the research is expected to meet the academic rigor standards of SINTA 2 accredited journals and be relevant to the development of contextual educational theology.

¹⁵ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*.

¹⁶ Thi Thao Uyen Bui and Tan Vinh An Tong, “The Impact of AI Writing Tools on Academic Integrity: Unveiling English-Majored Students’ Perceptions and Practical Solutions,” *AsiaCALL Online Journal* 16, no. 1 (January 2025): 83–110, <https://doi.org/10.54855/acoj.251615>.

3. Results and Discussion

Biblical Text Analysis: The Concept of Kenosis and Jesus' Leadership Style

An analysis of Philippians 2:5-11 shows that the concept of kenosis is central to Paul's understanding of the identity and actions of Jesus Christ. The Greek term *ekenōsen* (ἐκένωσεν) in verse 7 emphasizes Christ's active and conscious act of "emptying himself," not as a loss of divinity, but as a relinquishment of divine rights, status, and privileges. This reading is reinforced by the preceding phrase in verse 6, where Christ, though existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as *harpagmon* something to be grasped, seized, or exploited for his own advantage. Osborne and Thiselton agree that this text presents a descending movement from glory to humiliation as the path of obedience to God.¹⁷ This pattern forms the theological basis for leadership that is not oriented toward domination, but rather toward willingness to sacrifice.

The structure of the Christological hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 reveals the close relationship between kenosis and obedience. Jesus is described as obedient "even to death, even to death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8), which shows that His leadership cannot be separated from suffering and solidarity with humanity. Wright and Bird assert that the cross is not merely an event of redemption, but also a revelation of God's character and a Messianic pattern of life that reverses the logic of worldly power.¹⁸ The hymn does not end at the cross, however: verses 9-11 describe God exalting Christ and giving him the name above every name, so that every knee should bow. This movement of exaltation is significant for how kenosis is understood as a leadership paradigm. As Mitchell argues, the exaltation should not be read as limiting or reversing the kenotic self-emptying, as though glory were the reward that cancels out humility; rather, it undergirds the whole pattern, showing that the reversal of hierarchical power inaugurated in the descent is what is finally vindicated and made universal.¹⁹ Read this way, Jesus' leadership is paradoxical in a stable, not a temporary, sense: power is permanently reconstituted through humility rather than humility being a temporary station on the way back to conventional power.

This kenotic leadership pattern is also consistently evident in the Gospels, particularly in Mark 10:42-45 and John 13:1-15. In Mark, Jesus explicitly rejects the model of leadership of nations that "rule with an iron fist," replacing it with the principle that "whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all." John 13 presents the symbolic act

¹⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (InterVarsity Press, 2010); Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

¹⁸ N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (London: Zondervan Academic, 2019).

¹⁹ Roger Haydon Mitchell, "Editorial," *The Kenarchy Journal* 8 (2026), Kenarchy and Power issue, <https://kenarchy.org/kenarchy-and-power/>.

of foot washing as a concrete expression of kenosis and a redefinition of authority. According to Immink, this narrative affirms that Jesus' symbolic actions were both pedagogical and leadership practices.²⁰

From this biblical analysis, the main themes that emerge are radical humility, service as an expression of authority, obedience as the core of leadership, and an exaltation that vindicates rather than reverses this pattern. Jesus' leadership did not stem from a structural position, but from relationships and the example of his life. This finding confirms that kenosis is not only a Christological doctrine, but also a normative leadership paradigm for Christian communities across contexts, including education.

Jesus' Leadership: From Authority to Service

A comparison between the worldly leadership model and Jesus' leadership reveals fundamental differences. In general, the worldly leadership model is built on hierarchical structures, control of power, and legitimacy derived from formal authority, while Jesus' leadership is based on service, humility, love, and sacrifice for the well-being of others. In many social and institutional contexts, leadership is understood as the ability to influence others through position, structural power, and top-down decision-making mechanisms. For a theological comparative argument to be credible, this comparison needs to engage more precisely defined secular leadership theories rather than a broad, undifferentiated notion of "world leadership." Three frameworks are especially relevant here: transformational leadership, which centers on inspirational vision and the motivational elevation of followers; transactional leadership, which is based on structured relationships of reward and exchange between leader and follower; and trait-based leadership, which attributes effectiveness primarily to inherent personal qualities of the leader.²¹ Mdingi's research shows that models built on these structural and transactional logics often result in dominant relationships and have the potential to neglect the ethical and human dimensions of leadership.²² In the contemporary global context, this type of leadership pattern is increasingly criticized for its contribution to the crisis of trust and integrity of leaders.

In contrast, Jesus' leadership presents a paradigm that contrasts with the world's leadership patterns just described. Jesus explicitly rejected the "iron fist" style of leadership practiced by world rulers (Mark 10:42-45). Josette and Baholy emphasize that Jesus' leadership is paradoxical, because His authority is manifested through service and

²⁰ Gerrit Immink, "Theological Analysis of Religious Practices," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18, no. 1 (June 30, 2014): 127-38, doi:10.1515/ijpt-2014-0010.

²¹ Laurel B. Emory and David P. Peltz, "Leadership Development: The Role of Learning in the Authentic, Transformational, Servant, and Kenotic Leader," in *True Leadership: Leadership Styles and the Kenotic Relationship*, ed. David P. Peltz and John H. Wilson (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 109-18, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-46660-2_7.

²² Mdingi, "Who, Being in the Form of God, Did Not Consider It Robbery to Be Equal with God."

humility, not domination.²³ In this perspective, leadership is understood as a relationship that builds fellowship and solidarity, not as a tool of control.

This comparison shows that Jesus' leadership did not operate within the logic of worldly power whether transformational, transactional, or trait-based but rather within the logic of the Kingdom of God, which reverses the hierarchy of values. Nyland asserts that Jesus' kenotic leadership presents a *values-based leadership* approach oriented towards empowerment and community building.²⁴ Thus, Jesus' leadership offers a theological critique of worldly leadership models centered on power.

The Transformation of the Meaning of Authority in the Light of Kenosis

In the light of kenosis, the meaning of authority undergoes a fundamental transformation. Philippians 2:6-8 affirms that Jesus, despite his divine status, chose the path of self-emptying and obedience unto death. Mdingi interprets this action as a redefinition of divine authority that is not expressed through coercion, but through solidarity and self-sacrifice. This redefinition can be sharpened exegetically by distinguishing two New Testament Greek concepts that are often conflated in English translation: *exousia*, the authority to act that is granted or recognized within a relationship, and *dynamis*, raw power or force capable of compelling an outcome regardless of relationship.²⁵ Jesus' kenotic leadership retains *exousia* he continues to teach, heal, and command "with authority" (cf. Mark 1:22, 27) while renouncing *dynamis* as the operative logic of his leadership. Authority, in the kenotic perspective, is therefore not abolished, but its orientation is changed from dominating to serving.²⁶

This transformation also has broad social and ethical implications. Mitchell shows that kenosis opens up a new perspective on the relationship between sovereignty and humility, in which God's power is manifested in His willingness to relate and communicate with humans.²⁷ In the context of leadership, this means that the legitimacy of authority no longer rests on structural position, but on trust and moral exemplarity.

Thus, Jesus' leadership transforms authority into a means of liberation and formation, not oppression. Ottuh shows that a kenotic understanding of authority is contextually relevant, especially in societies that still struggle with authoritarian

²³ Ramarolahy Patricia Josette and Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina Baholy, "The Kenosis of Jesus Christ: Model of the Christian Life According to Philippians 2:5-11," *Britain International of Humanities and Social Sciences (BIOHS) Journal* 6, no. 1 (February 20, 2024): 25–38, doi:10.33258/biohs.v6i1.1061.

²⁴ Nyland, "Kenotic Leadership."

²⁵ N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World*; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*.

²⁶ Mdingi, "Who, Being in the Form of God, Did Not Consider It Robbery to Be Equal with God."

²⁷ Roger Haydon Mitchell, "Kenosis or Sovereignty? Christ Jesus and the Disclosure of the Divine Mind," *Theology* 127, no. 2 (March 1, 2024): 103–10, doi:10.1177/0040571X241232103.

leadership patterns.²⁸ This perspective affirms that in Christian leadership, true authority is manifested through service that restores human dignity and builds a just community.

Theological Synthesis: Kenosis, Christian Leadership, and Servant Leadership

Theological synthesis of biblical findings shows that Jesus' leadership has a conceptual correspondence with the theory of servant leadership that has developed in modern leadership studies. Characteristics such as service, empathy, and empowerment of others are strong points of convergence. Greenleaf emphasizes that the core of servant leadership is a commitment to the growth of those being led.²⁹ Since Greenleaf's foundational statement, servant leadership scholarship has continued to develop substantially, including van Dierendonck's synthesis of servant leadership's key dimensions and measurement approaches, and Parris and Peachey's systematic review of its organizational outcomes.³⁰ Kenotic leadership is thus in dialogue with an active, still-developing field, even as it provides a deeper theological foundation, rooted in Christology and the spirituality of the cross.

Unlike secular *servant leadership*, which is often oriented toward organizational effectiveness the very outcome-orientation that van Dierendonck's and Parris and Peachey's reviews document as the field's dominant concern kenotic leadership emphasizes moral and spiritual transformation instead. Mdingi asserts that kenosis shapes Christian leadership ethics based on humility and dependence on God, not on one's own capacity alone.³¹ Thus, Christian leadership is not only instrumental but also sacramental, bringing the values of the Kingdom of God into leadership practice.

Peltz and Wilson develop the concept of kenotic relationships as the core of authentic leadership, in which leaders consciously empty themselves of ego in order to build liberating relationships.³² This synthesis affirms that Jesus' leadership transcends psychological or managerial approaches, because it fully integrates spiritual, ethical, and relational dimensions. Leadership becomes a calling of faith, not merely a functional role.

Thus, kenotic Christian leadership can be understood as a spiritual practice that guides the community toward mutual transformation. This theological synthesis enriches Christian leadership theory by emphasizing that true authority arises from a willingness

²⁸ John A. Ottuh, "The Concept of Κένωσις in Philippians 2:6-7 and Its Contextual Application in Africa," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41, no. 1 (January 2020): 1–13, doi:10.4102/ve.v41i1.2081.

²⁹ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, 25th anniversary ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002).

³⁰ Dirk van Dierendonck, "Servant Leadership: A Review and Synthesis," *Journal of Management* 37, no. 4 (2011): 1228–61, doi:10.1177/0149206310380462; Denise L. Parris and Jon W. Peachey, "A Systematic Literature Review of Servant Leadership Theory in Organizational Contexts," *Journal of Business Ethics* 113, no. 3 (2013): 377–93, doi:10.1007/s10551-012-1322-6.

³¹ Mdingi, "Who, Being in the Form of God, Did Not Consider It Robbery to Be Equal with God."

³² Peltz and Wilson, *True Leadership*.

to serve and sacrifice, distinct from even as it converges with the effectiveness-oriented strand of servant leadership scholarship. This perspective is relevant for addressing the contemporary leadership crisis characterized by individualism and the cult of power.

Kenotic Leadership Pedagogy

Kenotic leadership pedagogy can be defined as an educational approach rooted in the concept of Christological kenosis, namely Christ's self-emptying for the sake of service and obedience to God (Phil. 2:5-11), which is translated into leadership and learning practices. In this framework, pedagogy is not understood merely as the transfer of knowledge, but as a formative process that shapes the identity, character, and relationships of learners through the example of the educator's life. To state this definition more precisely as a set of unpacked claims: kenotic leadership pedagogy holds (a) that the educator's own self-emptying models the content being taught, (b) that this modeling functions as a formative rather than merely informative pedagogical act, and (c) that the resulting relationship, not the transmission of doctrine alone, is the primary bearer of Christian formation. Belmonte and Rymarz emphasize that Christian education is *formational and transformational*, so that the leadership of educators becomes the primary medium for the inheritance of faith and Christian values through narrative and shared story.³³ Thus, kenotic leadership pedagogy integrates theological, ethical, and pedagogical dimensions in an integrative manner.

The first principle of kenotic leadership pedagogy is humility. Humility is understood not as weakness, but as a willingness to let go of ego, dominant authority, and self-interest for the sake of others' growth. Ramirez emphasizes that the kenotic transformation of authentic leaders rejects superiority and opens space for dependence on God and solidarity with others.³⁴ In the context of education, humility is manifested when educators are willing to learn together with students, acknowledge limitations, and position themselves as servants of the learning process, not rulers of the classroom.

The second and third principles are relationality and exemplarity. Kenotic leadership is relational because it is rooted in God's relationship with humanity, which is manifested through the incarnation of Christ. Gorman emphasizes that Jesus' actions, such as washing his disciples' feet, are leadership practices that are both pedagogical and

³³ Angelo Belmonte and Richard Rymarz, "Shaped by the Story: Narrative Theology, Storytelling and Christian Religious Education," *British Journal of Religious Education* 47, no. 4 (October 2, 2025): 494–502, doi:10.1080/01416200.2025.2461071.

³⁴ Andrea R. Ramirez, "The Impact of Kenosis on the Transformational Authentic Leader," in *True Leadership: Leadership Styles and the Kenotic Relationship*, ed. David P. Peltz and John H. Wilson (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 119–35, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-46660-2_8.

relational.³⁵ In kenotic leadership pedagogy, educators build dialogical, empathetic, and inclusive relationships, and present exemplary lives as “living texts” that are read by students. This exemplary behavior ensures that the values of faith do not remain mere discourse, but are internalized through concrete experiences.

The fourth principle is transformation, both at the personal and community levels. Kenotic leadership pedagogy aims to bring about a change in life orientation from self-centeredness to service and social responsibility. Emory and Peltz emphasize that kenotic relationships in leadership encourage moral and spiritual transformation, not just functional effectiveness.³⁶ In Christian Religious Education, this transformation is reflected in the formation of students who have ethical sensitivity, a commitment to service, and the ability to bring the values of the Kingdom of God into an ever-changing socio-cultural context. Thus, kenotic leadership pedagogy becomes a strategic means of forming future Christian leaders with a character of service.

Kenosis as a Formative Leadership Paradigm

Kenosis can be understood as a formative leadership paradigm when leadership is positioned primarily as a process of formation, not merely as management or functional influence. From a theological perspective, Jesus’ leadership based on self-emptying (Phil. 2:5–11) shows that the formation of character, moral orientation, and spiritual disposition of the community is the main goal of Christian leadership. Percy asserts that kenosis shapes an ethic of leadership oriented toward inner renewal and ongoing transformation, so that leadership is understood as a long-term process that shapes who a person “becomes,” not just what he or she “does.”³⁷ Thus, formative leadership is rooted in a praxis of life that consistently directs individuals and communities toward conformity to Christ.

In the context of education, this kenotic paradigm places leadership as a pedagogical formation process that takes place through relationships, role modeling, and daily practices. International research shows that formative Christian leadership emphasizes character and spirituality formation through meaningful interactions, not merely through normative instruction. Nyland emphasizes that kenotic leadership functions as an existential learning space, where values of faith are internalized through relational experiences and practical reflection.³⁸ This perspective affirms that education,

³⁵ Michael J. Gorman, “Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation,” *Interpretation* 67, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 93–95.

³⁶ Laurel B. Emory and David P. Peltz, “Leadership Development: The Role of Learning in the Authentic, Transformational, Servant, and Kenotic Leader.”

³⁷ Martyn Percy, “Humility in Leadership: Kenotic Ecclesiology for a Post-Pandemic Age,” *Modern Believing* 61, no. 4 (October 2020): 344–54, doi:10.3828/mb.2020.22.

³⁸ Nyland, “Kenotic Leadership.”

including Christian Religious Education, is a strategic field for kenotic leadership to holistically shape the life orientation of students.

The teacher-student relationship becomes a concrete space for kenosis, where self-emptying is manifested in an attitude of listening, empathy, and willingness to serve the student's learning process. In this relationship, the teacher does not display dominant authority, but rather relational authority that builds trust and mutual growth. Keys shows that Jesus' leadership as a servant provides a pedagogical model in which the learning relationship becomes the primary means of faith and character formation.³⁹ Thus, kenosis as a formative leadership paradigm affirms that Christian educational transformation occurs primarily through the teacher-student relationship that reflects the pattern of Christ's life: serving, shaping, and liberating. It is precisely this grounding of the four characteristics humility, relationality, exemplarity, and transformation in the concrete teacher-student relationship, rather than in clergy formation, that distinguishes this study's treatment of kenosis from the prior literature surveyed above.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Jesus' leadership in the perspective of kenosis serves as a formative paradigm that emphasizes the process of character and relationship building, rather than merely leadership effectiveness. These findings are in line with previous studies that place kenosis as the foundation of Christian leadership ethics and spirituality, particularly in affirming the values of humility, obedience, and service. However, unlike most previous studies that tend to focus on the context of ecclesiastical or clerical leadership, this study shifts the focus to the realm of education, particularly Christian Religious Education, thereby broadening the horizon of kenotic leadership application. This expansion enriches the understanding that kenosis is not only a normative-theological concept, but also has a concrete and contextual pedagogical dimension.

A comparison with previous studies also shows differences in conceptual emphasis. Studies on *servant leadership*, including the effectiveness-oriented strand documented by van Dierendonck and by Parris and Peachey, generally highlight the aspects of service and empowerment as effective leadership strategies,⁴⁰ whereas the findings of this study confirm that kenotic leadership works primarily through formative relationships and exemplary living rather than through strategies oriented toward

³⁹ Michella Keys, "Developing the Importance of Integrity To Consistently Display Biblical Principles and Characteristics in Ministry Leadership Roles," *Doctoral Dissertations and Projects*, July 22, 2025, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/7214>.

⁴⁰ van Dierendonck, "Servant Leadership: A Review and Synthesis"; Parris and Peachey, "A Systematic Literature Review of Servant Leadership Theory."

measurable effectiveness. This perspective offers a deeper reading of the phenomenon of Christian leadership, as it places the process of faith and character formation at the core of leadership. Thus, this study makes a new contribution by showing that Jesus' leadership cannot be reduced to a managerial model, but must be understood as a spiritual praxis that shapes the life orientation of the educational community.

Critically, these findings are relevant in the social and cultural context of education, which is still dominated by hierarchical relationships and instructional approaches. This study shows that kenotic leadership offers a more relational and transformative alternative paradigm, while challenging education practices that are centered on authority and control. Reflection on the sources also reveals that the application of this paradigm is not free from structural and cultural challenges, but that is precisely where its relevance lies as a prophetic critique of less humanistic leadership and education practices. By maintaining continuity between results and discussion, this study affirms that kenosis as a formative leadership paradigm opens up a new perspective in understanding Christian leadership as a continuous and meaningful process of formation.

Implications of Research

Implications for Christian Religious Education

The main implication of this study for Christian Religious Education lies in the need for a curriculum design that is oriented towards leadership formation, not merely cognitive achievement. The Christian Religious Education curriculum needs to be designed to shape the character, spirituality, and service orientation of students by making Jesus' kenotic leadership the basic framework. This means that learning objectives are not only formulated in terms of mastery of Christian faith material, but also in terms of leadership dispositions such as humility, social responsibility, and ethical sensitivity. A formation-based curriculum places leadership as a long-term formation process that is integrated into the entire learning experience. Groome's shared praxis approach offers one concrete curricular model for this orientation: by structuring learning around a continual movement between students' own lived experience and the Christian story and vision, it operationalizes formation as a pedagogical method rather than leaving it at the level of aspiration.⁴¹

This study also implies the need to strengthen reflective and participatory learning practices in Christian Religious Education. Kenotic leadership requires educators to create a dialogical learning space, where students are actively involved in the process of thinking, reflecting on faith, and making meaning. Reflective learning enables students to critically relate biblical texts, life experiences, and social realities, while participatory learning fosters a sense of responsibility and ownership of the learning process. With this

⁴¹ Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

approach, Christian Religious Education functions as a space for kenotic praxis, where students learn to lead by listening, serving, and working together.

The next implication is the formation of students' identities as future leaders who serve others. Christian Religious Education is no longer understood merely as a means of passing on religious traditions, but as a process of shaping individuals who are capable of bringing the values of the Kingdom of God into their social context. Through a formative curriculum and reflective-participatory learning practices, students are guided to see leadership as a calling in life, not as a means of gaining position or power. Thus, Christian Religious Education contributes directly to the formation of an ethical and transformative leadership culture in society.

Implications for the Church and Christian Educational Institutions

For churches and Christian educational institutions, this study emphasizes the importance of developing a culture of servant leadership rooted in Christ's kenosis. Organizational culture needs to be built on the values of service, humility, and mutually supportive relationships, rather than on rigid hierarchies and structural domination. Kenotic leadership encourages churches and Christian schools to view authority as a responsibility to serve and shape the community, so that every structure and policy is directed toward the mutual growth and well-being of community members.

Another important implication is the need to train educators as kenotic leaders. Educators in churches and Christian educational institutions do not only serve as teachers or administrators, but also as leaders in faith and character formation. Therefore, educator development programs need to include spiritual formation, theological reflection, and leadership training that emphasizes self-emptying, exemplary behavior, and relational sensitivity. Such training helps educators live out the values they teach, so that their leadership has integrity and transformative power.

Finally, this study implies the need to strengthen the synergy between churches and Christian educational institutions in building what this study terms a kenotic leadership ecosystem a working definition proposed here as the network of mutually reinforcing relationships, shared practices, and formation structures through which churches and schools jointly sustain kenotic values across the settings students move through, rather than confining those values to a single institution. Concretely, this means aligning the formation language and practices used in church catechesis with those used in the CRE classroom, and creating shared structures, such as joint mentoring programs between clergy and educators, so that kenotic values are reinforced consistently across the two settings. Churches and schools are called to work together as learning communities that support each other in faith and leadership formation. This synergy allows kenotic values to be not only taught conceptually, but also lived out consistently in

various areas of life. Thus, churches and Christian educational institutions can play a strategic role in shaping future leaders who are servant-minded, reflective, and transformative.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Jesus' leadership in the perspective of kenosis is a formative leadership paradigm that transforms the meaning of authority from domination to service. Through biblical text analysis, theological synthesis, and pedagogical reflection, this study shows that kenosis is not merely a normative Christological concept, but rather a practical foundation of leadership that shapes the character, relationships, and life orientation of a community. The main findings emphasize that Jesus' leadership is manifested through humility, relationality, exemplarity, and commitment to transformation, which are directly relevant to Christian Religious Education as a space for faith and leadership formation.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the enrichment of Christian leadership studies by integrating biblical studies, theology, and pedagogy into a single conceptual framework of kenotic leadership pedagogy. Practically, the findings of this research imply the need to reorient the curriculum design and learning practices of Christian Religious Education towards a formative, reflective, and participatory approach, as well as the development of a culture of servant leadership in churches and Christian educational institutions. From an institutional policy perspective, this research emphasizes the importance of training educators as kenotic leaders who are not only pedagogically competent but also spiritually and ethically mature. For further research, it is recommended that field-based empirical studies be conducted to explore the concrete experiences of educators and students in living out kenotic leadership, so that the understanding of kenosis as a formative leadership paradigm can be deepened and expanded in various socio-cultural contexts.

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