




A Reflection on the Episcopal System of Church Polity in the Context of the African Church

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ABSTRACT

The question of church polity has been central to theological discourse throughout the history of the Church. Theological reflections on the most suitable leadership model for the Church have evolved, with scholars from different historical periods expressing varying opinions. These debates generally center around three primary models of church governance: episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational. Though there are many publications on this subject, current scholarly interest in the debate justifies this research, which appraises the episcopal system within the African sociopolitical and ecclesiological contexts. The study critically appraised the episcopal model and its implications for ecumenical relations and interdenominational dialogue using a literature-based research methodology. The study found that while the episcopal system provides organizational stability and continuity, it also presents challenges related to authoritarianism and limited lay participation. The research concluded that contextual adaptations are necessary for the episcopal model to thrive in Africa's diverse cultural landscape. The paper contributes to the discourse by offering a contextualized evaluation of episcopal polity and suggesting paths for its development in African ecclesial settings.

Keywords: *Church Polity, Episcopal Leadership, Ecclesiology, Church Governance*

INTRODUCTION

The Christian Church, founded by Jesus Christ and born on Pentecost, has grown significantly throughout history. It spread worldwide through missionary work, evangelism, and other efforts, evolving into a universal and local entity. To a large extent, the Church can be considered both as a movement and an institution that adapts to the changing needs of human society while retaining its foundational principles.¹ The issue of church governance is introduced early in the Acts of the Apostles (even before the official inauguration of the church on the day of Pentecost), where the first recorded action following Jesus' ascension is the election of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot as one of the Twelve Apostles.² The election of Matthias

¹ David J Atkinson et al., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 2013), 229.

² Tim Dowley, *Introduction to the History of Christianity* (Fortress Press, 2013), 646.

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to replace Judas Iscariot highlights the early Church's concern with maintaining its leadership structure, ensuring continuity and stability in the apostolic mission.

Over the centuries, the Church has developed governance mechanisms that reflect its dual nature as both divine and human. These structures, while evolving, have maintained certain essential characteristics that preserve its identity and mission. The Church's leadership models have varied, with some emphasizing institutional hierarchy, while others focus on a more flexible, movement-based approach.³ The early Church faced numerous challenges as it expanded from Jerusalem to the farthest reaches of the world, and its governance structures evolved in response to these challenges. In doing so, the Church sought to maintain its core values while adapting to the diverse contexts in which it operated.

The quest for a leadership model for the church has yielded different styles, reflecting different theological interpretations of leadership, authority, and organizational structure. Although there are numerous variations, the four main systems that have emerged and been widely recognized are: episcopal, presbyterian, congregational, and a form of nongovernment (or leaderless governance).⁴ Episcopal governance places authority in bishops who oversee multiple churches; Presbyterian governance is led by a body of elected elders; Congregational governance gives authority to individual congregations with members making key decisions; and non-government (or leaderless governance) operates without formal leaders, emphasizing collective responsibility among all members.⁵

As the Church in Africa continues to expand and seek relevance in an ever-changing socio-cultural landscape, the issue of leadership remains a central concern in theological and ecclesiological discussions. While various governance models, such as Presbyterian and congregational systems, have gained prominence, the episcopal system of church polity still stands as a significant and sometimes controversial model in African Christianity. Despite its enduring influence, the suitability of the episcopacy for the African Church is often debated, particularly in light of the unique historical, cultural, and social dynamics of the region. The challenge lies in understanding how episcopal leadership, with its hierarchical and centralized authority, intersects with the African Church's need for contextual relevance, inclusivity, and adaptability, all while maintaining doctrinal integrity. This research aims to critically assess the role of episcopacy in the African Church, exploring its strengths, challenges, and implications for the future of church governance on the continent.

THE CONCEPTS OF CHURCH AND CHURCH POLITY

For the sake of clarity, certain terminologies have to be defined before moving on to the substantial issue. The term “Church” is defined as a community of believers called out by God to gather for worship, fellowship, and mission.⁶ Derived from the Greek word *ekklēsiā* (meaning “to call out”) the term “church” refers to an assembly of people summoned for religious purposes (Acts 19:32, 39, 40).⁷ In the Old Testament, *ekklēsiā* referred to the gathering of Israel for worship, and in the New Testament, it signifies the community of believers who consider themselves heirs to the people of God. Thus, the Church is not just an institution or a building, but a spiritual assembly—the citizens of God's city—continuing the legacy of God's people from the Old Testament into the New. The term “ecclesiology” refers to the study of the church and its systems, operations, structures, order, mandate, and relevance.⁸ Such a study helps to deepen understanding of the Church in its various forms and diverse operational modes through constructive analysis, objective investigation, and practical examination of its precepts, practices, and ordinances.

Church polity refers to the governance and organizational structure within a church or Christian denomination. It defines how authority, leadership, and decision-making are distributed and exercised among

³ Atkinson et al., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology I*, 229.

⁴ Millard J Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Baker Academic, 2013), 1079.

⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1079-1095.

⁶ Isaac Boaheng, “A Theological and Ethical Reflection on Digital Ecclesiology from an African Perspective,” *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)* 3, no. 2 (2022): 482.

⁷ Boaheng, “A Theological and Ethical Reflection on Digital Ecclesiology from an African Perspective,” 482.

⁸ Boaheng, “A Theological and Ethical Reflection on Digital Ecclesiology from an African Perspective,” 482.

the community of believers. It is imperative to emphasize that the nature of the Church, in relation to its essence, multifaceted character, diverse definitions, connection with the Kingdom of God, distinct historical epochs during which it has existed and functioned, as well as its attributes and characteristics, informs the factors that underlie varying forms of leadership and governance within identifiable denominations.

THE MEANING OF EPISCOPAL LEADERSHIP

Episcopacy has to do with the government of the church by bishops. In the episcopal form of church government, authority is vested in the office of the bishop (*episkopos*), with varying degrees of episcopacy depending on the church tradition.⁹ The word *episkopos* in its original Greek sense of “overseer” is essential to the church, but differed as to the functions of the overseer, referring to roles, authority, charges, responsibilities regarding ministry, sacraments, and ordinations.¹⁰ Episcopacy, as a hierarchical church structure, maintains that it retains ownership of parish property even when members leave the church. In contrast, those who depart argue that they should be entitled to keep control over individual church buildings and diocesan assets.

Inherent in the episcopal structure is the recognition of distinct levels of ministry.¹¹ Arguably, the most highly developed episcopal form of government is that found within the Roman Catholic Church, and the simplest form is found in the Methodist Church. In that system, the bishop of Rome (referred to as the pope or the father of the entire church) is the supreme authority.¹² The father of the church exercises authority through archbishops, who superintend large areas.¹³ Archbishops oversee multiple bishops, each of whom supervises various dioceses that contain several churches (parishes).¹⁴ The responsibilities of the bishops include the ordination of ministers, through whom they confer spiritual authority by the laying of hands. Bishops also have the power to appoint and assign ministers to particular congregations based on the needs of the diocese. They are also responsible for safeguarding the faith, upholding doctrine, and maintaining discipline within their jurisdictions. Serving directly under the bishops, rectors lead individual parishes, ensuring that the spiritual and administrative needs of the local congregations are met under the oversight of the diocesan bishop.

Here, bishops are not only considered successors of the apostles but also successors of Peter, who is seen and “recognized as the apostle that has primacy among the apostles”,¹⁵ and whose successor (the pope) is now acknowledged and respected as the “special representative of Christ.”¹⁶ For this reason, the Church of Rome is of the nature of an “absolute monarchy, under the control of an infallible pope”,¹⁷ with the right and sole prerogative to regulate doctrine, worship, government, ordinance, and is seen as “the supreme Pontiff.”¹⁸ For this and for some other reasons that some would equate the episcopacy with the church. Bishops wield so much power and are often regarded as the primary earthly channel of God's authority. It is believed that bishops inherit the authority originally entrusted to the apostles, transmitted through the laying on of hands from the time of Christ to the present. This continuity highlights the bishop's pivotal role in shaping the Church's identity and governance, as bishops are appointed through hierarchical structures rather than elected by local congregations. In such a system, the community of believers (*coetus fidelium*) plays no

⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1081.

¹⁰ Episcopal Church, “Statement on Abortion and Reproductive Rights,” 2022, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org>.

¹¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1151.

¹² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1151.

¹³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1082.

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology Chapter Summaries. PDF. From the Instructor's Manual*, ed. Daniel Julian. (MI: Zondervan, : Grand Rapids, , 1994), 127-128; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1081.

¹⁵ Louis. Berkhof, “Systematic Theology,” in *Banner of Truth Trust*, Expanded ed. (Edinburgh: PA, 2021), 605.

¹⁶ Berkhof, “Systematic Theology,” 605.

¹⁷ Berkhof, “Systematic Theology,” 605.

¹⁸ Berkhof, “Systematic Theology,” 605.

direct role in the Church's governance.¹⁹ As Erickson notes, within the episcopal model, "authority resides in a particular office, that of the bishop."²⁰

In some churches, like the Methodist Church, there are divisions within the first level, that is, deacons and elders. At this level, the clergy are authorized or given the dispensation to formally handle all the "basic duties associated with the ministry—they preach and administer the sacraments."²¹ There is a second level, the appointment of a bishop, which grants that person specific special authorities.²² Here, the bishop is so key to the church's functioning that "some would go as far as to say that episcopacy is of the very essence of the church: the church cannot exist without it." As a matter of emphasis, "a few would even assert that episcopacy is the church."²³ The presiding Bishop presides over the whole connexion, serving as the denomination's highest ecclesiastical authority. The Presiding Bishop provides spiritual oversight, ensures doctrinal integrity, coordinates the work of subordinate bishops and clergy, and represents the church in national and international contexts. The diagram below gives a general overview of the Episcopal church polity.²⁴

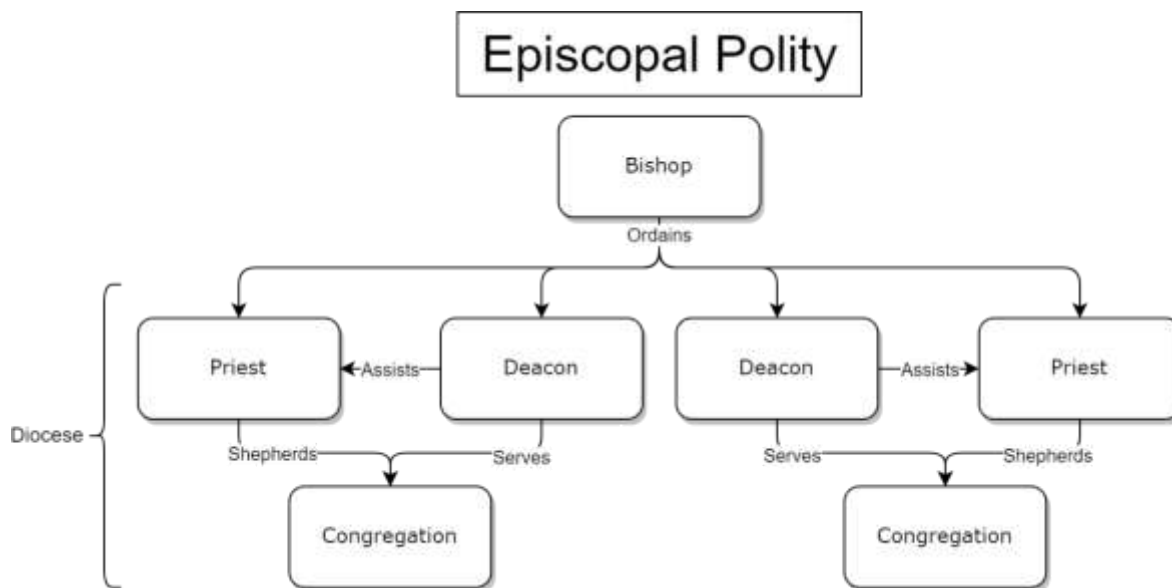


Figure 1: An Overview of the Episcopal church polity

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF EPISCOPAL LEADERSHIP

The origins of episcopacy are quite obscure; however, it is known that during the Jewish phase of Christianity (that is, between c. AD 30 and AD 70), the Church had a regular ministry handled by officers such as bishops, elders (presbyters), and deacons. Churches of Jewish origin tended to employ the term "Elder" for a leader, while Gentile churches used "Bishop" for leaders of higher rank. Episcopacy might have begun during the Hellenistic-Roman phase of Christianity, which spanned roughly from AD 70 to AD 500. By the second century AD, episcopacy was subtly becoming established in the main centres of Christianity outside

¹⁹ Berkhof, "Systematic Theology," 605.

²⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1151.

²¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1151.

²² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1151.

²³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1152.

²⁴ Even though not everything in the diagram is covered in this work, it gives the general overview of what this system looks like. Different denominations have contextualized this model in different ways for their contexts. Retrieved from

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesiastical_polity

Jerusalem. According to Mark E. Dever, by this time, pastors in leading societies had accrued increased power not only over well-established churches but also over newly evangelized areas.²⁵

Although persecutions made it difficult to gain a universal picture of the life and activity, it is known that from the second to the fourth centuries the diocese emerged as an ecclesiastical region, with a single bishop heading it.²⁶ It is highly probable that episcopacy took its most recognizable form and became a widely accepted and workable system of church governance around the third century, especially as Church Fathers like Origen began to systematize ecclesiastical thought in the non-Jewish world.

After the conversion of Emperor Constantine (in A.D. 312), which marked a remarkable milestone in the history of the church, bishops continued to play a prominent role in Church leadership. For example, Eusebius became bishop of Caesarea in A.D. 323. The decisions of councils summoned to resolve theological and ecclesiastical issues—such as the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325—were made by gatherings of bishops. There is also an episcopal succession list for major bishoprics such as Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria, which provides further evidence of the growing institutional authority of bishops within the early Church.

Several periods may be distinguished in that regard, namely the period of the Old Catholic Church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the Protestant Scholasticism, the Rationalism and Supranaturalism, and the Modern Theology. In all of this, bishops were around. There is no question that development has been championed by the Roman Catholic Church as church and state were bedfellows, where authority and order were regulated by bishops and became rather entrenched during the counter-reformation as the Roman Catholic Church attempted to maintain its hold, strengthen its power and consolidate its forms, orders and governance. Episcopacy is thus “closely tied to the idea of apostolic succession, the belief that bishops can trace their office in a direct, uninterrupted line back to the Apostles of Jesus.”²⁷ During the Old Catholic Church era, it is noted that “in the beginning of this period some valuable preparatory work was done by the catechetical school of Alexandria, but it was not until the beginning of the third century that any important work appeared which purported to be a systematic presentation of theological truth”.²⁸ Obviously, such systematizations were not certainly without ecclesiological polity. Thenceforth, as the bishops’ duties increased and congregations grew in size and number, it was necessary either to have more bishops or to delegate some of their functions to others. Congregations in an area (diocese) were entrusted to presbyters (priests), assisted by deacons, under the bishop’s supervision. This was the church polity established throughout the Roman Empire. The bishop retained the exclusive right the power to confirm church members, ordain priests, and consecrate other bishops.

As the Middle Ages advanced, the system of delegation of duties became excessively organized, and an ecclesiastical bureaucracy, though in its infantile stage, became stronger and consolidated. A complex hierarchy of subordinate officials acted on the bishop’s behalf. Bishops made important contributions to the medieval state, yet “this activity interfered with the office of church leader.”²⁹ For instance, in the 2nd century, a bishop was charged with “the spiritual welfare of his congregation; he was the chief liturgical minister - baptised, celebrated the Eucharist, ordained, absolved, controlled finances, and settled matters of dispute.”³⁰ With state recognition of Christianity in the 4th century, bishops came to be regarded not only as church leaders but also as “an important figure in secular affairs.”³¹ It has been noted that until Vatican Council I, from 1869 to 1870, the pope was perceived as “having supreme authority, but only when he acted in concert with the other bishops.”³² However, it was at that Council that the decision was taken and the resolution made that he has supreme and virtually unlimited authority in his own right. The assumption and declaration that “when the pope speaks *ex cathedra* (in his official capacity) in matters of faith and practice,

²⁵ Mark. Dever, “The Doctrine of the Church,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 833.

²⁶ Dever, “The Doctrine of the Church,” 833.

²⁷ Episcopal Church, “Statement on Abortion and Reproductive Rights.”

²⁸ Berkhof, “Systematic Theology,” 69.

²⁹ Episcopal Church, “Statement on Abortion and Reproductive Rights.”

³⁰ Episcopal Church, “Statement on Abortion and Reproductive Rights.”

³¹ Episcopal Church, “Statement on Abortion and Reproductive Rights.”

³² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1152.

he is infallible”³³ was from Vatican I. However, the exact character of this authority was never fully defined. This is “because the council had to adjourn before it could elaborate upon infallibility.”³⁴

It should be noted that “there is considerable difference of opinion as to when the pope is speaking *ex cathedra*, and how many such statements there have been in the history of the church.”³⁵ The pope does not ordinarily preface a decree by stating, “I am about to make an *ex-cathedra* pronouncement.” However, we note that “Being wise and careful leaders, the popes have been cautious about identifying their official declarations as *ex cathedra*, since once made, such rulings are irrevocable and unalterable.”³⁶ Though the assumption and resolution of the pope regarding the domain and scope of his authority is declared in principle, the pope exercises his authority through the bishops, in practice. “While they may act independently of him, the fact remains that they have received their powers from him.” The pope is the highest authority in the Roman Catholic Church, with ultimate control over doctrinal and ecclesiastical matters.³⁷ Although the pope cannot directly appoint his successor, he has significant influence over the selection process, as he appoints the cardinals who elect the next pope. As a result, the pope indirectly shapes the future leadership of the Church.³⁸

In the 16th century Reformation, the episcopal system was vehemently rejected, vitally abandoned, and vigorously renounced by most Protestants, partly for its involvement in political rule and partly for the fact that many believed and perceived the system as not based on the New Testament. It is part of the reason that the Reformation had to break with the immediate past and appeal to the remoter past. “It had to show that the hierarchical church of the Middle Ages had wandered far from the path indicated by the theology of the early Church.”³⁹ This break had measurable bearing on an ecclesiological polity that differed from episcopacy from the outset. It is worth noting that, Protestantism’s defence of “the right of private judgment disturbed traditional foundations,”⁴⁰ some of which resulted in such systems of church governance as congregational and presbyterian, among others. The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Old Catholic, and Swedish Lutheran churches are some examples of denominations with the episcopal form of church government, plus some German Lutheran churches, and the United Methodist Church. It has been, however, observed that in the 20th-century ecumenical movement, episcopacy was problematic for churches seeking reunion. Although some maintained its necessity to the church, others thought it beneficial, and still others considered it neither necessary nor beneficial.

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR EPISCOPACY AND EVALUATION

This section outlines biblical arguments to support episcopal governance. First, it is argued that the Church's leadership structure is rooted in the authority given by Christ.⁴¹ According to the Gospel of Matthew (28:18), Christ claimed all authority in heaven and on earth and sent his apostles with this divine mandate (vv. 19–20; Acts 1:8). The apostles, being the direct followers chosen by Jesus, were the original officers with the exclusive right to exercise ecclesiastical authority. As the New Testament indicates, the apostles delegated some of their authority to others, notably figures like Timothy and Titus, while also appointing elders to oversee local churches (Acts 14:23). This early practice of ordination highlights that while the apostles were responsible for selecting and laying hands on church leaders, they were also involved in delegating authority to ensure the continuity of governance within the Christian community.⁴² The appointment of leaders in the early Church, such as when the apostles selected seven men to assist in the work (Acts 6:3, 6), further reinforces the episcopal model. These individuals were presented to the apostles, who then laid hands on

³³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1152.

³⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1152.

³⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1152.

³⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1083.

³⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1083.

³⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1083.

³⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 73.

⁴⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 73.

⁴¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1083.

⁴² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1083.

them, symbolizing the transmission of authority. This process suggests a hierarchical, apostolic foundation for leadership, in which the original apostles' authority is passed down through the laying on of hands, thus linking the Church's governance structure to a divine and historical tradition.

Another argument in favour of episcopacy is the position James occupied in the early church.⁴³ James, often regarded as the leader of the church in Jerusalem, exercised authority and oversight that some argue mirrors the responsibilities later taken on by bishops. His leadership, characterized by decision-making authority over important theological matters (such as the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15), serves as a precedent for the episcopal system. Just as James held a central position of authority within the early Church, so do modern bishops carry the responsibility of governance, pastoral oversight, and doctrinal preservation in their respective dioceses. In addition, “the sayings in the New Testament that underscore the authority of church leaders (Heb. 13:7, 17) point to the pastor as one who possesses responsibility and authority in the church.”⁴⁴ This historical example, some claim, provides a biblical foundation for the hierarchical structure of episcopacy, reinforcing the view that the bishop’s role is not only divinely sanctioned but also grounded in early church practices.

There is also a historical argument of a direct apostolic succession from the apostles to today’s bishops.⁴⁵ The theory of apostolic succession holds that the authority passed down from the apostles through the ordination of bishops is legitimate and essential for preserving the integrity of the Church. In the New Testament, the apostles were charged with maintaining doctrinal purity and ensuring the continuation of the Church's mission. It is reasonable to believe that their successors, the bishops, were entrusted with the same authority to lead and govern the Church. Though the Scriptures emphasize the importance of spiritual qualifications and sound doctrine (as seen in 2 Cor. 11:13), this does not necessarily undermine the notion of apostolic succession; rather, it strengthens the case that bishops, as spiritual leaders, must meet the same qualifications as the early apostles—character, integrity, and faithfulness to the Word of God.

As a way of evaluation, it can be said that the concept of episcopacy, or church governance by bishops, is not explicitly outlined in the New Testament (NT) in a clear and developed manner. While some texts mention individuals laying hands on others (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim. 4:14), there is no direct command or detailed description to establish a specific hierarchical system of governance. The apostles themselves did not formally structure the church in a way that would clearly support episcopacy. There are no significant distinctions made between the roles of bishops and elders in the early church (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim. 4:14), and this lack of clarity raises questions about whether episcopacy is biblically mandated. Furthermore, while the apostles were given direct authority by Christ (Gal. 1:15–17), there is no evidence in Scripture to suggest that a system of apostolic succession, such as that underpinning episcopacy, was established by God or explicitly endorsed in the New Testament.

The term *episkopos* (overseer or bishop) appears in the NT, but is often used interchangeably with the role of *elder* or *pastor*.⁴⁶ In some cases, *episkopos* refers to individuals with leadership roles in the church (Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1),⁴⁷ and it is associated with both a function and an office. The office of the bishop appears to have evolved as the church grew from a movement to a more organized institution. The roles of bishop and elder, while often conflated in Scripture, later became distinct as church structures developed. In passages like 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, bishops are described as having specific qualifications and duties, primarily pastoral in nature, focusing on spiritual oversight, sound doctrine, and church discipline. However, the bishop's authority is spiritual and does not extend into secular realms of power, emphasizing care for the flock rather than control over secular matters.

Concerning the historical perspective, one may say that the development of episcopacy in church history is seen as a response to the need for order and unity within the growing Christian community. Over

⁴³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1084.

⁴⁴ Dever, “The Doctrine of the Church,” 832-833.

⁴⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1084.

⁴⁶ Dever, “The Doctrine of the Church,” 832.

⁴⁷ *Overseer*, Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/overseer/#>

time, church leadership became more structured, with bishops assuming greater responsibility for local congregations. The system of episcopacy, particularly as seen in the Roman Catholic Church, is often viewed as a way to preserve unity and continuity within the church, especially in the context of a rapidly expanding and geographically diverse body of believers. However, the hierarchical nature of the system has been critiqued by reformers such as Martin Luther, who rejected the institutionalized authority of the medieval church in favor of a more scripture-based, less politically structured ecclesiology.⁴⁸ Luther's views emphasized that the church's authority was rooted in the common acceptance of the Word, rather than in a divinely established political structure.⁴⁹

Protestant denominations, particularly those adhering to presbyterian or congregational church polity, reject the hierarchical nature of episcopacy, emphasizing the importance of mutual accountability and shared leadership.⁵⁰ In contrast, denominations that maintain episcopal polity, such as Anglican and Lutheran churches, argue that their governance reflects the biblical principles of church leadership and is grounded in the NT teachings, despite their historical and cultural differences from the early church. The evolution of episcopacy, with its layered levels of authority from archbishops to bishops to rectors, reflects both historical developments and the need to adapt to the changing social and religious contexts of the church. A cursory observation of the NT shows that when it came to ordinary officers, frequent mention "is made of elders, notably in the book of Acts. Alongside this term, the name 'bishop' was used to designate the same kind of officers."⁵¹ It should be admitted that while both names were applied to 'the same class of officers, the name 'elder' stressed their age, as bishop points to their work as overseers for administration, orderliness and measurable growth in mosaic communities, where leadership in keeping the identity, integrity and influence of the church was of the highest importance.⁵² In the NT, the terms, pastor, elder, " and " overseer "denote the same office. In Acts 20:17, 28, the elders of the church at Ephesus are said to have been made overseers (or bishops) over the flock."⁵³ Certainly, the purpose was for them to *feed*, in other words, shepherd or pastor the church of God. Thus, the terms elders, overseers and pastors are used of the same men, doing the same thing for the same purpose.

Grudem highlights that in the New Testament, church leadership is entrusted to three main officers: apostles, elders, and deacons. He notes that the leadership model in early Christian churches consistently involved *plural elders* (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1–2), with no indication of any alternative forms of governance. The term *elder* is used interchangeably with *pastor*, *bishop*, or *overseer* (1 Tim 3:1-2; Acts 20:17-38; Phil 1:1). Elders were responsible for governing and teaching in the early church (1 Tim 5:17; Eph 4:11), serving as examples of Christlikeness. He contrasts this model with hierarchical systems like episcopacy, noting that in the New Testament, church governance was based on local congregational decision-making rather than central authority. Several key reasons support this local approach: the NT churches modeled leadership through the congregation's affirmation of officers (Acts 6:3; 15:22), and final governing authority rested with the local body rather than an external leader (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:4). This model encourages accountability and reduces the risk of doctrinal error, as leadership remains accountable to the local congregation. The episcopal system, where archbishops oversee multiple bishops, is viewed as a later development, a political construct designed for order and flexibility, rather than something explicitly mandated by the New Testament. The notion that bishops were meant to replace apostles is not found support in the NT, since the apostles did not establish a line of succession. According to Grudem, ordination by the Lord does not require an apostolic lineage.

⁴⁸ Atkinson et al., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, 229.

⁴⁹ Atkinson et al., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, 229.

⁵⁰ Atkinson et al., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, 229-230.

⁵¹ Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 320.

⁵² Louis Berkhof, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Illinois: Versa Press Inc, 2020), 128-129.

⁵³ Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 320.

COMPARISON BETWEEN EPISCOPACY AND OTHER SYSTEMS

As noted earlier, church governance varies across the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Non-Governmental systems. The Episcopal system centers authority in bishops, who oversee ordination and pastoral assignments; the Presbyterian model involves shared leadership among elected elders, while the Congregational system gives authority to the local congregation. In contrast, Non-Governmental polity lacks formal leadership, with decisions made collectively by members. Each structure reflects different views on authority, leadership, and community within the church. The table below summarizes the key characteristics of each model, highlighting their unique approaches to governance and leadership.

Table 1: Key characteristics of each model

Model	Episcopal	Presbyterian	Congregational	Nongovernmental
Authority	Authority flows from the top down — from bishops to priests/pastors and then to the congregation.	Authority is shared between local elders and higher church courts (sessions, presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies).	Each local church is autonomous and self-governing. Leadership decisions are made by members or elected leaders within the congregation.	Informal, sometimes with rotating leadership or shared leadership among spiritually mature members.
Examples	Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Some Lutherans	Presbyterian, Reformed, Some Bible churches	Baptist, Congregationalists, Most independent churches	Quakers, Plymouth Brethren, House churches
Distinctives	Multiple levels of clergy (bishops, priests, deacons). Emphasizes apostolic succession.	Leadership through elected elders. Structured church courts: Session, Presbytery, Synod, General Assembly.	Each congregation is self-governing. Pastor is often the sole elder. Emphasizes local control.	Emphasizes the invisible church. Leadership is informal or spontaneous. Low ecclesiastical structure.
Advantages	Unity in doctrine and practice. Strong organizational cohesion.	Shared leadership and accountability. Balanced structure.	High congregational involvement. Flexibility and adaptability.	Maximizes individual freedom. Reliance on spiritual spontaneity.

AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN REFLECTION ON EPISCOPAL LEADERSHIP

Continuities and Advantages

The Episcopal system of governance in the Church shares notable similarities with traditional African leadership structures, particularly in its hierarchical nature and emphasis on sacred authority. In many African societies, leadership is centralized and hierarchical, with roles and responsibilities clearly delineated among chiefs, elders, and royal councils. For example, the Akan-Bono (Ghana) chieftaincy system is structured around a paramount chief (*manhene*) who governs over various divisions, supported by divisional chiefs and a council of elders.⁵⁴ For example, the Dormaahene rules over the Dormaa state, comprising traditional towns and cities in Ghana's Bono and Ahafo regions. The Dormaahemaa is the queen mother of this area. Under

⁵⁴ For more on this consult, Isaac Boaheng and Ebenezer Asibu-Dadzie, *Essays in the Old Testament & African Life and Thought* (Noyam Publishers, 2020), 85 - 87. <https://doi.org/10.38159/npub.eb20701>.

the Dormaahene are such chiefs as Abesimhene, Amasuhene, Bomaahene, Wamfiehene, Chiraahene, Nkrankwantahene, and others serving his council as divisional chiefs.⁵⁵ Each of these chiefs also has sub-chiefs under their authority. Similarly, the Ewe (Ghana), Yoruba (Nigeria), and Zulu (South Africa) also exhibit complex political hierarchies that ensure both leadership and communal participation.^{56,57} The hierarchical nature of episcopacy also aligns with the African preference for leadership models that emphasize respect for authority. In many African societies, elders and leaders are revered for their wisdom and experience, and the bishop, in a similar manner, embodies this respect for authority. This system creates a sense of order and stability within the church, which is particularly important in fast-growing and often resource-poor African contexts. The bishop's authority ensures that the doctrinal consistency is maintained and that the church's mission and vision are applied uniformly in different regions.

In the African context, the episcopal system of church governance offers distinct advantages, particularly in its efficiency, unity, and ability to provide clear leadership in a region marked by cultural diversity, political instability, and rapid social change. One of the key strengths of this system is its ability to make swift and centralized decisions. In many African societies, where decision-making often follows a hierarchical and centralized structure—such as the role of paramount chiefs or local leaders—the episcopal model resonates with traditional leadership structures. The concentrated authority in the hands of bishops allows for quick resolutions to theological, doctrinal, or practical challenges, especially in situations requiring immediate action. For instance, when the Church needs to respond quickly to doctrinal issues, such as the debate on human sexuality or the role of women in ministry, episcopal governance allows for decisions that are not bogged down by prolonged discussions or debates, which can be common in more decentralized systems.

Another advantage of episcopal governance is its economy of action. With a centralized leadership structure, resources—whether human, material, or financial—can be allocated efficiently, ensuring that the Church remains focused on its mission without excessive administrative delays. This is particularly beneficial in large, multi-congregational African denominations, where coordination between rural and urban churches can be cumbersome in more participatory governance models. For many African Christians, especially in remote areas, the hierarchical nature of episcopacy ensures that decisions, related to church programs, aid distribution, or mission work, are implemented promptly and effectively. The directness of episcopal leadership helps minimize bureaucratic delays and maximizes the Church's responsiveness to its people.

Episcopal governance also promotes structural unity within the Church, which is critical in African societies where unity and cohesion are highly valued. African traditions often emphasize the importance of a unified community, whether within a family, village, or tribe. The clear hierarchical structure of episcopacy mirrors this emphasis on unity by allowing dioceses and congregations, even those in distant regions, to operate under a shared system of leadership and doctrine. This unity ensures that churches within the same denomination follow consistent teachings, liturgical practices, and ethical guidelines, preserving the integrity of the faith in different cultural contexts. Given the vast diversity of Africa, from the Yoruba in Nigeria to Zulu in South Africa, episcopal governance provides a framework that binds the Church together to promote a sense of solidarity and mutual support among believers.

In addition to organizational unity, episcopal governance offers doctrinal consistency. Maintaining doctrinal unity is vital in African Christianity, where theological teachings are often deeply intertwined with cultural values and societal norms. The centralized decision-making structure of episcopal leadership ensures

⁵⁵ For more on this consult, Isaac Boaheng, "Abanpredease Christology: A Christological Interpretation of Dormaahene's Chieftaincy Appellations," *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology*, May 31, 2022, 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.38159/motbit.2022411>.

⁵⁶ See Isaac Boaheng, *A Contextual Political theology for Contemporary Ghana* (PhD Dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2023), 110; Isaac Boaheng, "Kingship Christology: A reflection on Midnight Crew's 'Igwe' from an Igbo socio-cultural perspective," *International Journal of Social Science and Religion (IJSSR)* Volume 4, Issue 3 (2024): 39–66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53639/ijssr.v4i3.199>.

⁵⁷ Isaac Boaheng, "A Contextual Political Theology for Contemporary Ghana" (University of Pretoria, 2023), 110; Isaac Boaheng, "Kingship Christology: A Reflection on Midnight Crew's 'Igwe' from an Igbo Socio-Cultural Perspective," *International Journal of Social Science and Religion (IJSSR)* 4, no. 3 (2024): 39–66.

that the Church adheres to a unified doctrinal stance, whether on moral issues such as marriage and sexuality, or on theological debates concerning salvation and the nature of the Church. For example, in many African contexts, episcopal systems help maintain conservative views on issues like homosexuality, ensuring that the Church's teachings remain consistent with its historical and doctrinal foundations. This unity can be particularly appealing in societies where social pressures may push for liberal or progressive changes, offering a sense of stability and continuity in an otherwise fast-changing world.

Moreover, episcopal governance in Africa aligns with a long-standing reverence for authority and elders within many African cultures. Just as chiefs and elders are viewed as guardians of tradition and wisdom, bishops in the African Church are seen as authoritative figures who uphold spiritual and moral standards. Their leadership is rooted not only in doctrinal authority but also in the communal respect for those in positions of power. This connection between spiritual and temporal authority often makes bishops in African communities both religious and social leaders, holding sway over matters that extend beyond the Church influencing societal values, local development, and community cohesion.

The episcopal system also preserves elements of African spirituality that are tied to tradition and mystical experience. In many African cultures, rituals and ceremonies carry profound spiritual significance, often linking the present with the ancestral realm. Similarly, the rich liturgical life of episcopal churches allows African Christians to connect with the transcendent through sacramental worship, prayer, and the celebration of key life events. The episcopal system supports a deep sense of continuity with the early Christian Church, while also creating spaces for African Christians to experience their faith in culturally relevant ways. This mystical and experiential aspect of episcopacy resonates strongly with African Christians who value the richness of spiritual tradition, especially through practices such as the laying on of hands, the anointing with oil, and the symbolic use of regalia in church rituals.

Lastly, episcopacy's historical continuity with the early Christian Church is an appealing aspect, especially as African Christianity seeks to assert its legitimacy and authenticity. For many African Christians, episcopacy connects them to the early Church Fathers and the apostolic traditions that were established in the New Testament. This historical link provides a sense of rootedness, offering both spiritual depth and continuity that resonates with African sensibilities about tradition and ancestral respect. On a continent where history and identity are deeply tied to cultural heritage, the connection between African Christianity and the early church becomes a powerful symbol of legitimacy and faithfulness to the broader Christian community.

Discontinuities and Disadvantages

Although the episcopal system offers advantages in terms of order, unity, and continuity, it faces notable challenges in the African context. One of the most significant disadvantages of episcopal governance in Africa is its difficulty adapting to modern societal changes, particularly with respect to inclusivity, gender equality, and human rights. Across the continent, African societies are evolving rapidly, embracing democratic ideals, gender justice, and the rights of marginalized groups. However, many episcopal churches in Africa struggle to align their hierarchical, traditional governance models with these changing societal values. For instance, issues such as women's leadership in the Church and the need for greater lay participation in decision-making are contentious areas where the episcopal model often conflicts with more progressive movements within African societies. While African cultures traditionally place a high regard on elders and authority, the push for gender equality and inclusivity is gaining traction in urban and youth-led movements, which often feel frustrated by the lack of flexibility in traditional church leadership.

The centralized authority inherent in episcopal governance can promote an elitist, top-down leadership structure, which is at odds with Africa's growing commitment to democratic values and participatory leadership. African societies are increasingly rejecting systems that concentrate power in the hands of a few elites, a sentiment rooted in the historical experiences of colonization and autocratic governance. For instance, many African countries have experienced long periods of authoritarian rule, which have led to widespread disenchantment with hierarchical, undemocratic leadership structures. The same top-

down structure in the Church can create a similar sense of disempowerment, where local congregations feel excluded from decision-making processes.

The centralized model of the Episcopal system often leads to a disconnect between the hierarchical leadership and the lived realities of local congregations. Africa is characterized by its immense cultural, ethnic, and regional diversity, and local communities often have distinct ways of organizing, leading, and practicing their faith. The episcopal system, with its top-down decision-making, may not respond adequately to the unique needs and contexts of different African communities. For example, while bishops may be highly respected in African culture, they are often far removed from the day-to-day struggles of rural congregations, where economic challenges, social issues, and even religious practices can differ significantly from those of urban or metropolitan centers. This lack of proximity to local realities can create a sense of alienation among the faithful, leading to disengagement from church life.

In African traditional leadership models, such as those found among the Akan, Zulu, or Yoruba peoples, leaders are deeply rooted in their communities and selected through processes that emphasize collective decision-making and accountability to the people. These indigenous forms of leadership, based on mutual respect and communal participation, are often at odds with the hierarchical and centralized nature of episcopal governance. As African societies continue to evolve and embrace democratic governance, there is an increasing demand for church leadership structures that reflect these values of shared leadership, transparency, and local engagement. Therefore, the challenge for the episcopal model in Africa is how to balance respect for authority with a more inclusive, locally relevant approach to leadership.

In African contexts, where respect for authority figures is culturally embedded, the concentration of power in the office of the bishop can easily lead to authoritarian practices, even within the Church. This centralization of authority can foster an environment ripe for corruption, poor decision-making, and abuse of power. Many African countries have witnessed firsthand the destructive effects of concentrated political power, often leading to widespread poverty, inequality, and disenfranchisement. These experiences shape the expectations and demands of African Christians, many of whom are pushing for more transparency, accountability, and participatory governance in all sectors of society, including the Church. In a system where the bishop holds significant spiritual, political, and sometimes even economic power, the risk of authoritarianism is high, especially in contexts where systems of accountability are weak and church leadership operates with little scrutiny.

Episcopal governance can also hinder local church missions in Africa by emphasizing centralized control and limiting the autonomy of local congregations. Many African churches are situated in remote areas where local leadership is better suited to understanding the specific challenges of their communities. However, under episcopal governance, decisions are often made at the regional or national level, leading to a lack of responsiveness to local needs. This is particularly problematic in a continent marked by diverse socio-economic conditions, where the needs of a rural congregation in a country like Kenya may vastly differ from those in a metropolitan area like Lagos, Nigeria. Local leaders in African churches, who understand the cultural and economic realities of their congregations, may find themselves sidelined by a distant episcopacy, which weakens the Church's ability to respond effectively to the needs of its members.

In African churches, where the bishop is often seen as a father figure or even a quasi-political leader, an ineffective or corrupt bishop can have far-reaching consequences. Given the highly centralized nature of episcopal governance, poor leadership at the top can destabilize the entire denomination, causing division and disillusionment. Lack of checks and balances, often exacerbated by cultural reverence for bishops, can prevent local congregations from challenging or holding their leaders accountable. In many parts of Africa, where trust in leadership is critical for social cohesion, the failure of a bishop to lead ethically can result in spiritual harm and fragmentation within the Church. The challenge, then, is how to ensure that episcopal leadership remains transparent, accountable, and grounded in the values of justice and integrity, which resonate deeply with African societal expectations.

Again, the formalized structure of episcopal governance can sometimes place more emphasis on the office of the bishop rather than on the personal qualities, character, and spiritual integrity of the individual

holding the office. In African societies, where personal integrity, wisdom, and communal respect are central to leadership, the episcopal system's focus on institutional power can lead to situations where leadership positions are occupied by individuals whose character does not align with the Church's mission. In many African traditions, leadership is expected to be servant-oriented and rooted in humility, qualities that may be overlooked in a system that elevates the position over the person. This discrepancy can undermine the moral authority of the bishop and alienate congregants who expect their leaders to exemplify the virtues of faith and service.

Finally, there are historical and biblical objections to the episcopal model, particularly regarding the doctrine of apostolic succession. Historically, objections to episcopacy are raised based on early church practices. Erickson highlights three key points: first, the early church made decisions through consensus rather than a hierarchical structure (Acts 15:22); second, the concept of apostolic succession is a theory with little supporting evidence; and third, the form of church government varied depending on the community, indicating flexibility rather than a rigid, uniform system.⁵⁸ He further argues that the apostles primarily offered recommendations and advice without exercising direct rulership or control.⁵⁹ J. E. Wehrmeyer argues on the contrary that biblical examples such as the excommunication of the man in 1 Corinthians 5:5, the deaths of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5:5, and the qualifications for church leaders outlined in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 indicate that the apostles did, in fact, wield significant authority over the churches.⁶⁰

MOVING FORWARD

The future of episcopal governance in the African Church must navigate a path that honors its historic roots while adapting to contemporary realities. First, there is a need for contextual reform that retains the strengths of episcopal leadership—such as unity, doctrinal consistency, and organizational efficiency—while addressing its challenges, especially issues of inclusivity, accountability, and local engagement. Bishops must move beyond traditional hierarchical models toward a servant-leadership approach that emphasizes collaboration with clergy, laity, and local communities.

Second, greater participation of the lay should be encouraged within episcopal structures. Mechanisms for consultation and shared decision-making can be established to ensure that local congregations are meaningfully involved in church governance without undermining episcopal authority. This will help bridge the gap between centralized leadership and grassroots realities, fostering a deeper sense of ownership and belonging among congregants.

Third, the episcopal system must invest in leadership development that prioritizes spiritual maturity, integrity, cultural sensitivity, and administrative competence. Training programs for bishops and clergy should incorporate contemporary leadership principles rooted in biblical theology and African communal values, ensuring that leaders are equipped to meet the complex needs of a rapidly changing continent.

Fourth, there is a need for structural flexibility within episcopal governance. Recognizing the diversity of African societies, diocesan structures must be adaptable enough to reflect local contexts without losing connection to the broader church body. Contextualized expressions of episcopal leadership can enhance relevance, resilience, and responsiveness.

Finally, the African Church must embrace a missional ecclesiology within episcopal frameworks—one that sees the bishop not merely as an administrator of tradition, but as a catalyst for mission, justice, community development, and reconciliation. In this way, episcopal leadership can contribute meaningfully to the spiritual and social transformation of Africa, aligning the Church's governance with the biblical vision of leadership as service and stewardship.

⁵⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1084.

⁵⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1089.

⁶⁰ J. E. Wehrmeyer, "Where Have All the Bishops Gone?," *Acta Theologica* 2009, no. sup-2 (2009): 116.

CONCLUSION

The future of episcopacy in the African Church is shaped by a delicate balance between tradition and the evolving social, political, and economic realities of the continent. While the episcopal system provides unity, doctrinal consistency, and centralized leadership, it faces increasing pressure to adapt to demands for more inclusive and participatory governance. The hierarchical nature of episcopacy, while ensuring order and stability, can also create a disconnect between church leadership and local congregations, particularly in rural areas, and may perpetuate authoritarianism and a lack of accountability. As Africa continues to embrace democratic values and advocate for human rights, there is a growing call for greater lay involvement and decentralization of power within the Church. For the episcopacy to remain relevant, bishops must exercise their authority with greater transparency, collaboration, and sensitivity to local needs, ensuring that leadership is responsive and inclusive. Ultimately, the future of episcopacy in Africa lies in its ability to adapt to these challenges, preserving its spiritual and doctrinal integrity while embracing a more participatory, community-centered model that reflects the diverse and dynamic nature of African society.

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