Rethink Church Article

CONTENTS

Title Page 3

Abstract 4

INTRODUCTION 6

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ECCLESIA 9

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND THE CHANGING CHUR… 12

TECHNOLOGY, DIGITAL MINISTRY, AND VIRTU… 15

LEADERSHIP CONTEXT 18

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE 21

PURPOSE, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND SIGNIF… 24

LITERATURE REVIEW 27

LITERATURE CRITIQUE 34

LITERATURE GAPS 36

LITERATURE SYNTHESIS 38

LITERATURE INTEGRATION 40

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK 42

THE RETHINK CHURCH CONCEPTUAL MODEL 47

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY 50

APPLICATION OF THE RETHINK CHURCH DIA… 57

FROM REACTIVE MANAGEMENT TO PROACTI… 59

IMPLEMENTATION AND FEASIBILITY PLAN 61

TITLE PAGE

Title Block

Rethink Church:

A Proactive Diagnostic Framework for Discipleship, Leadership Development,

Digital Ecclesia, Kingdom Multiplication, and Sustainable Church Transformation

Dr. Osei Nti, DBA, MBA, MSML, M.Ed.

Rethink Independent Research Institute (RIRI)

A Research Division of Oseinti Legacy Centre Inc.

Independent Researcher

September 2026

ABSTRACT

Abstract body

The purpose of this conceptual article is to develop Rethink Church, a proactive diagnostic framework for examining how evangelism, discipleship, spiritual formation, church engagement, leadership development, digital ecclesia, kingdom multiplication, and organizational sustainability interact in contemporary churches. The problem addressed is that churches may adopt programs, technologies, branches, or expansion strategies without an integrated pre-implementation assessment of whether people, leadership systems, discipleship pathways, and organizational structures are ready to sustain them. The article integrates biblical ecclesiology with scholarship in organizational socialization, person-organization fit, transformational leadership, systems thinking, digital religion, discipleship, and organizational change. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design is proposed for future empirical validation: quantitative assessment would identify readiness patterns, followed by qualitative interviews designed to explain those patterns, with integration allowing convergence, divergence, or complementarity. Rethink Church is presented as a testable conceptual contribution rather than a claim of proven causal effectiveness. The framework moves from gospel outreach through centralized teaching, community, discipleship, spiritual formation, leadership development, commissioning, kingdom multiplication, and sustainable ecclesia. Anticipated utility includes earlier identification of leadership, engagement, formation, and system-level gaps before expansion decisions are implemented. Future multi-site and cross-cultural research is required to establish validity, reliability, transferability, and practical usefulness.

Keywords

Keywords: Rethink Church, ecclesia, discipleship, church leadership, digital ecclesiology, organizational sustainability, mixed methods

INTRODUCTION

Church mission and systems alignment

Churches operate at the intersection of theology, human relationships, leadership, culture, technology, and organizational systems. Their spiritual mission does not remove the practical requirement to align people, processes, authority, communication, formation, and resources. The contemporary church therefore faces a dual responsibility: faithfulness to its theological identity and disciplined attention to the conditions through which that identity is practiced. Recent research on digital ministry and discipleship illustrates that expanded technological reach can coexist with unresolved questions about participation, leadership involvement, relational depth, and embodied community (Cornelio-Arias, 2026; Wyatt, 2026). These tensions make proactive diagnosis increasingly relevant.

Proactive versus reactive diagnosis

The Rethink Church framework begins from the proposition that church problems should not be examined only after decline, conflict, leadership shortage, failed expansion, or disengagement becomes visible. A reactive model asks why an initiative failed after resources have already been committed. A proactive model asks whether the church possesses the spiritual, relational, leadership, and organizational conditions required before the initiative is launched. This distinction parallels the problem-oriented research logic emphasized in applied doctoral work, where existing evidence is critically examined before implementation decisions are proposed (South College, 2026).

Ecclesiology and organizational analysis

Rethink Church does not reduce the church to a business organization. Rather, it recognizes that congregations are simultaneously theological communities and organized social systems. Scripture describes the church through spiritual images such as body, household, temple, flock, and people of God, while also depicting leadership selection, teaching, stewardship, conflict resolution, mission, and multiplication (Acts 2:42-47; 6:1-7; Ephesians 4:11-16). Organizational analysis can therefore serve ministry when it remains subordinate to ecclesiological purpose rather than replacing it.

Changing participation and digital formation

The framework also responds to the changing environment of religious participation. Digital communication, mobile technologies, social platforms, migration, hybrid work, generational change, and geographically distributed communities have altered how people encounter teaching and form relationships. Studies of digital discipleship show that online environments can support faith formation, while also exposing limitations in participation, service, mentoring, and relational depth (Darmawan et al., 2024; Wyatt, 2026). The relevant question is consequently not whether technology is simply good or bad, but how it is integrated into a coherent pathway of formation and community.

Leadership development as discipleship outcome

Leadership development is another central concern. A church that depends primarily on recruiting already-formed leaders may expand faster than its internal discipleship system can reproduce mature servants. By contrast, a developmental ecclesiology asks how people move from encounter to belonging, formation, service, leadership, and commissioning. The pattern of calling, accompaniment, correction, empowerment, and sending has been identified as a meaningful leadership paradigm in recent practical-theological scholarship (Tangkilisan et al., 2024). Rethink Church therefore treats leadership supply as an outcome of discipleship architecture rather than only a staffing problem.

Article scope and contribution

This article develops Rethink Church as a conceptual and methodological framework that can later be tested empirically. It follows a structured progression from historical and social context to the problem, purpose, literature, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, methodology, implementation, limitations, and future research. Consistent with scholarly caution, no empirical findings are claimed. The contribution is a diagnostic architecture and a research plan through which its assumptions can be examined.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ECCLESIA

Early ecclesial integration

The Christian ecclesia emerged as a community organized around proclamation, teaching, fellowship, prayer, shared life, and witness. Acts 2:42-47 portrays a pattern in which doctrine, community, worship, generosity, and growth are interconnected rather than isolated ministry departments. The historical significance of this pattern is that expansion is represented as a social and spiritual process: people hear, enter community, learn, participate, and become part of a visible body. Rethink Church draws from this integrated logic while avoiding the assumption that one historical form must be mechanically reproduced in every culture.

Institutionalization and recurring tensions

As Christianity expanded geographically, church structures became more formalized. Leadership offices, councils, liturgies, educational institutions, missionary systems, and denominational structures developed to preserve doctrine and coordinate increasingly complex communities. Institutionalization created continuity and scale, but it also introduced recurring tensions between movement and institution, charisma and office, local adaptation and centralized authority. These tensions remain relevant because contemporary churches frequently attempt to preserve inherited structures while responding to social and technological environments that operate differently from those in which the structures developed.

Modern organizational complexity

The modern era intensified organizational complexity. Urbanization, mass media, professionalization, denominational bureaucracy, megachurch models, parachurch organizations, and global missionary networks expanded the possible scale of Christian ministry. Church growth became increasingly connected with strategic planning, specialized staff, facilities, media, and program design. Such developments can extend ministry capacity, but they can also encourage measurement of attendance and reach without equivalent attention to formation, leadership reproduction, or relational integration. Rethink Church therefore distinguishes expansion indicators from sustainability indicators.

Digital era transition

The digital era represents another historical transition. Online sermons, livestreaming, social media, messaging applications, learning platforms, digital giving, and virtual small groups now permit churches to reach people beyond a local building. Hosea et al. (2024) describe digital ecclesiology as requiring adaptation in how churches form members, while Natan et al. (2025) connect digitalization with opportunities and challenges for evangelism, discipleship, and leadership. The historical shift is therefore not simply from physical to digital communication; it is from a predominantly place-bound ministry environment to a networked and hybrid one.

Digital scale and formative effects

Recent scholarship also cautions that digital scale can reshape rather than merely transmit church practices. Cornelio-Arias (2026) argues that algorithmically mediated ministry raises questions about embodied presence and the formative effects of digital environments. Wyatt (2026), however, reports evidence that meaningful spiritual formation can occur among digital participants while identifying differences in leadership involvement and engagement beyond services. Together, these perspectives discourage simplistic conclusions and support diagnostic questions about what forms of ministry are strengthened, weakened, or transformed by particular technologies.

Historical continuity and present purpose

Historically, then, the ecclesia has repeatedly adapted organizational forms while negotiating continuity of mission and identity. Rethink Church situates current challenges within that longer pattern. Its purpose is not to declare one church form universally superior, but to provide a disciplined way to examine whether a congregation's chosen form connects proclamation, belonging, formation, leadership, mission, and sustainability in a coherent system.

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND THE CHANGING CHURCH ENVIRONMENT

Rapid social change and distributed lives

Contemporary congregations serve populations shaped by rapid social change. Individuals increasingly move across cities, countries, workplaces, educational systems, and online networks, making stable geographic community less automatic. Churches consequently encounter participants with different expectations regarding access, communication, authority, learning, belonging, and time. A ministry model designed around one weekly gathering may reach some people effectively while failing to create meaningful pathways for those whose lives are distributed across physical and digital environments.

Generational communication and formation

Generational differences further complicate communication and formation. Digital-native participants may encounter religious ideas through short-form video, podcasts, social media, online communities, and algorithmic recommendations before entering a congregation. Kusika and Tanuwihardja (2026) identify the need for church leadership to adapt communication and digital discipleship strategies when engaging Generation Z. Adaptation, however, should not be confused with uncritical imitation of platform culture; churches must evaluate whether communication practices deepen understanding, relationship, and formation.

Fragmentation and belonging

Social fragmentation also affects belonging. People may have extensive networks yet experience limited durable community, while churches can record high audience reach without knowing whether participants are known, mentored, serving, or accountable within a community. This distinction matters because discipleship involves more than content exposure. Francis et al. (2026) found that congregational activity alone was not sufficient to explain discipleship growth among young participants, highlighting the importance of personal practices and multiple pathways of formation.

Migration and transnational participation

Migration and transnational life create additional opportunities and constraints. A person may maintain spiritual relationships with a church in one country while living in another, participate online during travel, or move between congregations. Hybrid ecclesial systems can support continuity, but they also complicate pastoral responsibility, membership, safeguarding, leadership authorization, and local service. Rethink Church therefore treats geographic reach as one variable within a larger system rather than as proof of healthy multiplication.

Leadership expectations and concentration of authority

Changing social expectations also influence leadership. Congregants may expect transparency, accessibility, rapid communication, digital competence, and meaningful participation. At the same time, pastors face increased demands across preaching, counseling, administration, media, fundraising, conflict management, and organizational leadership. When authority is concentrated without adequate leadership development, expansion can magnify dependence on a small number of individuals. A diagnostic model must therefore examine leadership distribution, role clarity, succession, and developmental pipelines.

System-level evaluation of sustainability

The social context supports the central argument of this article: contemporary church sustainability cannot be evaluated through attendance or visibility alone. The relevant unit of analysis is the system connecting people to teaching, relationships, formation, service, leadership, mission, and ongoing community. Rethink Church uses that system-level perspective to identify where growth may be broad but shallow, where formation may be deep but inaccessible, or where leadership capacity may be insufficient for the scale being pursued.

TECHNOLOGY, DIGITAL MINISTRY, AND VIRTUAL ECCLESIA

Digital ministry as ecclesial environment

Digital ministry should be understood as an ecclesial environment rather than a broadcasting technique. A livestream can distribute preaching, but a virtual ecclesia requires additional structures for relationship, teaching, prayer, pastoral response, discipleship, participation, service, and leadership. Hosea et al. (2024) emphasize adaptation in member formation within digital contexts, while Kim (2026) describes online community through distributed, participatory, and everyday-life discipleship models. These perspectives support evaluating digital ministry by formative function rather than audience size alone.

Capabilities of digital ministry

The benefits of digital ministry are substantial. Technology can reduce geographic barriers, connect travelers and migrants, extend access to people with mobility constraints, archive teaching, enable asynchronous learning, and create communication channels across time zones. Natan et al. (2025) argue that digitalization offers strategic opportunities for evangelism and discipleship where geography and human resources constrain traditional ministry. In Rethink Church, these benefits are treated as capabilities that must be linked to defined ministry outcomes.

Limitations of online participation

Digital ministry also presents limitations. Online participation can make disengagement easy, weaken accountability, fragment attention, and encourage consumption without service. Wyatt's (2026) mixed-methods study found broadly comparable flourishing outcomes across digital and in-person cohorts but identified differences in leadership involvement, serving, and engagement beyond weekend services. This suggests that digital participation should not be dismissed, but neither should reach be mistaken for full integration into communal life.

Algorithmic mediation and theological concern

Algorithmic environments add another layer of complexity. Platforms decide what users see through systems optimized for engagement, personalization, and commercial goals. Cornelio-Arias (2026) argues that such mediation can reshape users and raises theological concerns about replacing embodied presence with frictionless information transfer. Rethink Church incorporates this critique by asking not only whether technology expands ministry but also what behaviors, expectations, and relationships the technology encourages.

Hybrid integration

A hybrid model can respond to these tensions when digital and embodied practices are intentionally connected. Online teaching may lead to local groups; virtual prayer may support geographically dispersed members; digital courses may prepare leaders for supervised ministry; and online pastoral contact may create bridges to in-person care. The diagnostic issue is integration. If digital ministry functions as a disconnected media department, it may increase visibility without strengthening the church's developmental pathway.

Digital ecclesia evaluation criteria

Accordingly, Rethink Church evaluates digital ecclesia through access, relationality, formation, participation, leadership, safeguarding, and integration. Technology is neither the center of ecclesiology nor an optional afterthought. It is an environmental factor capable of amplifying both strengths and weaknesses already present in the church system.

LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

Leadership sustainability and expansion

Leadership sustainability is a recurring constraint on church multiplication. New branches, ministries, and digital campuses require people who can teach, care, administer, communicate, resolve conflict, and embody the community's values. When expansion occurs faster than leader formation, the organization may fill positions based on immediate availability rather than demonstrated readiness. Rethink Church therefore examines leadership capacity before expansion decisions are finalized.

Developmental ecclesiology and equipping

A developmental approach begins with discipleship. Ephesians 4:11-16 depicts ministry leadership as equipping the saints for service and maturity rather than monopolizing ministry. This theological pattern is compatible with contemporary leadership research emphasizing empowerment and development. Tangkilisan et al. (2024) describe discipleship as leadership through calling, accompaniment, corrective formation, and commissioning, suggesting that leadership development can be embedded within spiritual formation rather than treated as a separate staffing function.

Transformational leadership lens

Transformational leadership provides a useful organizational lens because it emphasizes vision, motivation, individualized consideration, and development beyond transactional exchange (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In a church setting, however, transformational concepts must be applied carefully so that charismatic influence does not become personality dependence. The diagnostic question is whether leadership practices increase the capacity of others to serve responsibly or merely increase attachment to a central leader.

Leadership socialization

Leadership also depends on socialization. New volunteers and emerging leaders need to understand doctrine, mission, norms, responsibilities, decision processes, and expected behaviors. Organizational socialization research explains how newcomers learn the knowledge and roles required for participation (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Applied to churches, this perspective helps explain why enthusiasm alone may not produce dependable ministry: people need structured pathways into identity and responsibility.

Person-organization fit in churches

Person-organization fit further clarifies the relationship between individual values and organizational culture. Kristof (1996) conceptualized fit as compatibility between people and organizations based on needs, supplies, demands, abilities, or shared characteristics. For churches, fit should not become a mechanism for excluding difference; rather, it can help assess whether leaders understand and can responsibly represent the theological commitments, ethical expectations, and ministry practices of the community.

Leadership development as a system

Rethink Church therefore treats leadership development as a system composed of identification, formation, assessment, supervised practice, feedback, authorization, and ongoing development. A church with many activities but no reproducible leadership pathway may possess operational energy without sustainable capacity. Diagnosing that gap before multiplication is one of the framework's principal practical purposes.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Unassessed readiness before change

Churches often respond to visible opportunities by adding services, branches, programs, media channels, or leadership appointments. These decisions may be spiritually motivated and strategically reasonable, yet the underlying readiness conditions are not always assessed in an integrated manner. The problem is that contemporary churches may pursue expansion or organizational change without a proactive diagnostic process that evaluates whether evangelism, discipleship, spiritual formation, engagement, leadership development, digital integration, and organizational systems are sufficiently aligned to sustain the proposed change.

Narrow growth indicators

This problem becomes more consequential when growth indicators are interpreted narrowly. Attendance, views, followers, giving, or new locations can demonstrate reach, but they do not independently establish mature discipleship, leadership reproduction, relational integration, or organizational sustainability. Research on digital discipleship illustrates this distinction: meaningful formation may occur online, while participation in leadership and service can differ across modes of engagement (Wyatt, 2026). A diagnostic framework must therefore distinguish exposure, participation, formation, and multiplication.

Timing and systems failure

The problem also concerns timing. Many organizational assessments occur after symptoms emerge: volunteer burnout, pastoral overload, conflict, declining attendance, stalled branches, financial pressure, or leadership vacancies. Systems thinking suggests that visible events are often produced by deeper patterns, structures, and feedback relationships (Senge, 2006). Waiting for failure can make corrective action more expensive and emotionally difficult.

Fragmented scholarship and practical gap

Existing church literature provides substantial insight into evangelism, discipleship, leadership, digital ministry, and organizational change, but these areas are frequently examined as separate concerns. Digital ecclesiology research considers online formation; leadership studies examine pastoral adaptation; discipleship studies examine spiritual growth; and organizational theories address fit, socialization, and change. The practical gap addressed by Rethink Church is the absence of a single proactive diagnostic architecture integrating these concerns around readiness for sustainable ecclesial development.

Evidence-informed decision making

The problem is not that churches lack faith, commitment, or programs. Rather, the issue is whether decision makers possess an evidence-informed way to examine relationships among ministry dimensions before committing to expansion or major change. This framing avoids blaming pastors or congregants and focuses instead on system design, alignment, and learning.

Proposed diagnostic dimensions

Rethink Church responds by proposing six diagnostic dimensions - Evangelism, Spiritual Formation, Church Engagement, Leadership Development, Kingdom Multiplication, and Church Sustainability - embedded within a broader developmental pathway. These dimensions are propositions requiring empirical testing, not predetermined conclusions. Their value depends on whether future research demonstrates that they can be measured reliably and used meaningfully across different church contexts.

PURPOSE, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND SIGNIFICANCE

Purpose statement

The purpose of this conceptual study is to develop the Rethink Church framework for examining proactive organizational and ministry readiness among contemporary churches operating across physical, digital, or hybrid settings; for the utility of the study, proactive church readiness is defined as the degree to which evangelism, formation, engagement, leadership, multiplication, and organizational systems are sufficiently aligned to support responsible ministry development before major expansion or change is implemented.

Research questions

RQ1. How can evangelism, spiritual formation, church engagement, leadership development, kingdom multiplication, and church sustainability be integrated into a coherent proactive diagnostic framework?

RQ2. How do leaders and participants explain quantitative patterns of strength, weakness, convergence, or tension across the proposed diagnostic dimensions?

RQ3. How can physical, digital, and hybrid ministry environments be assessed without assuming that one mode automatically produces superior formation or sustainability?

RQ4. How can diagnostic findings inform implementation decisions while avoiding claims that the framework guarantees church growth or spiritual outcomes?

Theoretical significance

The theoretical significance of Rethink Church lies in integrating organizational theories with practical ecclesiology. Organizational socialization, person-organization fit, transformational leadership, systems thinking, and organizational change each explain part of the church-development problem. Bringing them into a single diagnostic architecture may reveal relationships that remain obscured when each construct is examined independently.

Empirical significance

The empirical significance lies in creating a framework that can be operationalized and tested. Future research can examine dimensional structure, reliability, associations among constructs, differences across church types, and qualitative explanations of quantitative patterns. Such testing could contribute data to areas of church research that are often discussed normatively but less frequently measured in integrated designs.

Practical significance

The practical significance concerns decision quality. Church leaders could use diagnostic information to identify whether a proposed branch, digital campus, leadership appointment, or expansion strategy requires additional formation, communication, resources, or governance before implementation. The framework is intended to support reflection and planning, not to substitute for theological discernment or pastoral judgment.

Social significance

The social significance involves access and participation. Hybrid ministry can connect people who are geographically distant or unable to attend consistently, but inclusion requires more than content delivery. A diagnostic approach can help churches ask whether remote participants have meaningful pathways into community, discipleship, service, pastoral care, and leadership.

Methodological significance

The methodological significance is the use of sequential explanatory mixed methods. Quantitative data can identify patterns across diagnostic dimensions, while qualitative interviews can explore why those patterns exist. Integration permits convergence, divergence, and complementarity rather than treating qualitative testimony as automatic confirmation of survey results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Integrated significance

Together, these forms of significance position Rethink Church as a bridge between theological identity, empirical inquiry, and practical implementation. Its contribution will ultimately depend on transparent testing, refinement, and replication rather than on the authority of the framework's originator.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Formation beyond attendance

Discipleship literature consistently treats formation as more than attendance. Christian formation involves learning, practice, identity, relationship, vocation, and participation in community. Francis et al. (2026) found that multiple pathways, including personal prayer, Bible study, reflection, worship, and public engagement, contribute to discipleship growth. This multidimensionality supports Rethink Church's refusal to use a single activity as a proxy for spiritual formation.

Biblical grounding for formation

Biblical models likewise connect teaching with practice and community. Matthew 28:18-20 frames the Great Commission around making disciples, baptizing, and teaching obedience, while Acts depicts teaching within shared communal life. These texts do not provide a modern measurement instrument, but they establish theological reasons to distinguish proclamation from the longer process of formation.

Digital discipleship evidence

Digital discipleship expands the environments in which formation can occur. Darmawan et al. (2024) examined digital discipleship among youth leaders and found digital media useful for mentoring and faith development. Wyatt (2026) similarly provides empirical evidence that online participation can support flourishing, while also documenting differences in participatory depth. The literature therefore supports a both-and analysis rather than a binary digital-versus-physical debate.

Formation as relational leadership development

Formation is also relational. Tangkilisan et al. (2024) interpret Jesus' relationship with disciples as a leadership-development process involving calling, accompaniment, correction, and empowerment. This perspective connects spiritual development with future ministry responsibility and supports the Rethink Church proposition that leadership pipelines should emerge from discipleship systems.

Limits of organizational reduction

At the same time, spiritual formation cannot be fully reduced to organizational variables. Prayer, worship, theological conviction, spiritual experience, and perceived divine calling include dimensions that organizational science does not exhaust. Rethink Church therefore uses organizational concepts as analytical aids while preserving the distinct theological character of ecclesial formation.

Developmental distinctions

The literature consequently supports a diagnostic distinction among encounter, belonging, learning, formation, service, leadership, and commissioning. These stages may overlap rather than occur linearly, but distinguishing them enables researchers to examine where participants enter, progress, stall, or disengage within a church's developmental system.

Engagement beyond exposure

Engagement describes active participation in the life and mission of a community rather than passive exposure to its content. In churches, engagement may include worship, small groups, service, giving, prayer, learning, pastoral relationships, outreach, and leadership. Because these behaviors differ in meaning and intensity, a diagnostic model should not collapse them into a single attendance measure.

Belonging in networked ministry

Belonging is especially important in networked ministry. Digital participants can experience real relational connection, yet the mechanisms of belonging differ from those in a geographically concentrated congregation. Kim (2026) emphasizes participatory and everyday-life dimensions of online community, suggesting that online ecclesia can become relational when members are given meaningful roles rather than treated as audiences.

Engagement and information flow

Engagement also affects information flow. Members who participate across multiple ministry contexts are more likely to encounter leaders, receive feedback, understand norms, and contribute to organizational learning. Conversely, highly centralized systems may limit upward communication and conceal problems until they become crises. This relationship connects engagement with systems thinking and organizational socialization.

Service as bridge to leadership

Volunteer service is a particularly important bridge between belonging and leadership. Service creates opportunities for responsibility, observation, mentoring, feedback, and skill development. Wyatt's (2026) finding of differences in serving and leadership involvement between digital and in-person cohorts indicates why digital churches need deliberate pathways into participatory roles.

Interpreting activity carefully

Engagement should nevertheless be interpreted carefully. High activity can reflect healthy commitment, but it can also produce overload or role diffusion. Diagnostic assessment should therefore consider quality, sustainability, role clarity, and voluntariness rather than assuming that more activity is always better.

Engagement defined

Rethink Church conceptualizes engagement as relational and participatory integration into the community's worship, learning, service, communication, and mission. This definition connects engagement to both spiritual formation and organizational sustainability.

Reproductive leadership pipeline

Leadership development literature suggests that sustainable organizations deliberately cultivate capacity rather than relying only on external recruitment. In churches, this principle aligns with the biblical emphasis on equipping others for ministry and entrusting teaching to reliable people who can teach others (2 Timothy 2:2; Ephesians 4:11-16). The resulting leadership pipeline is reproductive rather than merely positional.

Socialization mechanisms

Organizational socialization provides a mechanism for understanding how people learn roles and culture. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) describe socialization tactics through which newcomers acquire knowledge and behaviors needed for organizational participation. Churches similarly socialize members through teaching, mentoring, rituals, service teams, informal relationships, and leadership expectations.

Fit and responsible alignment

Person-organization fit adds a complementary perspective. Kristof (1996) explains fit through compatibility between individuals and organizations. Applied cautiously, this concept helps churches examine alignment between a leader's beliefs, values, abilities, and role demands. It should not be used to suppress diversity or legitimate favoritism; the relevant concern is responsible alignment with mission and ethical expectations.

Transformational leadership and safeguards

Transformational leadership contributes attention to vision, motivation, development, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These dimensions can support church leadership when leaders inspire service and develop others. Yet transformational leadership also requires safeguards because strong vision can become personality-centered if accountability and distributed leadership are weak.

Digital competence in leadership

Recent church-leadership scholarship emphasizes digital competence alongside spiritual and relational qualities. Heryanto et al. (2025) argue that leaders in technologically advanced contexts must integrate digital capacity without abandoning spiritual values. Natan et al. (2025) similarly connect digital leadership with evangelism, discipleship, delegation, and ministry reach.

Leadership readiness elements

The synthesis of these literatures suggests that leadership readiness includes more than charisma or theological knowledge. It involves formation, cultural understanding, competence, relational trust, supervised experience, role clarity, digital capability where relevant, and accountable authorization. These elements form the leadership-development dimension of Rethink Church.

Definition of sustainability

Sustainability refers to the capacity to continue mission responsibly over time without exhausting the people, finances, leadership, or systems on which ministry depends. It is not synonymous with institutional survival at any cost. A sustainable church may change programs, structures, or locations while preserving theological identity and mission.

Multiplication and systems demands

Multiplication introduces additional demands because each new branch or ministry context requires leadership, communication, resources, and contextual adaptation. Expansion can therefore reveal latent weaknesses that remain manageable in a single location. Systems thinking is useful because it focuses attention on relationships and feedback loops rather than isolated events (Senge, 2006).

Financial sufficiency as partial indicator

Financial sustainability is relevant but insufficient. A church can possess adequate revenue while suffering from leadership bottlenecks, volunteer burnout, weak discipleship, or unclear governance. Conversely, a smaller congregation may demonstrate strong relational and leadership capacity despite limited financial resources. Rethink Church therefore treats finances as one resource condition within a broader sustainability construct.

Kingdom multiplication beyond branding

Kingdom multiplication in the proposed framework emphasizes reproduction of disciples, leaders, ministries, and communities rather than only organizational branding. This distinction is theological and practical. A church that opens locations without reproducing mature leaders may increase operational complexity without increasing sustainable ministry capacity.

Digital multiplication caution

Digital multiplication similarly requires caution. Online platforms make audience growth inexpensive relative to physical expansion, but visibility can outpace pastoral capacity. The literature on digital ecclesiology repeatedly raises questions about community, authority, formation, and participation (Cornelio-Arias, 2026; Hosea et al., 2024; Kim, 2026). Sustainable digital ministry therefore requires intentional structures beyond content production.

Sustainability conceptualized

Rethink Church conceptualizes sustainability as the continuing alignment of mission, people, leadership, relationships, governance, resources, and adaptive capacity. Multiplication is sustainable when the system can reproduce these conditions rather than merely reproduce activities.

LITERATURE CRITIQUE

Fragmentation across disciplines

The reviewed literature offers substantial insight but remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries. Practical theology examines discipleship and ecclesiology; leadership studies examine influence and development; organizational research examines culture, fit, socialization, and change; and digital-religion scholarship examines mediated community. Each field illuminates part of the problem, yet church leaders making expansion decisions confront all of these dimensions simultaneously.

Measurement limitation

A second limitation concerns measurement. Church-health discussions frequently use normative language such as healthy, mature, effective, or missional without specifying measurable indicators or distinguishing theological judgment from empirical observation. Conceptual richness is valuable, but diagnostic use requires constructs that can be operationalized transparently and tested for reliability and validity.

Binary digital interpretations

A third limitation is the tendency to equate digital ministry either with innovation or with theological loss. Recent research provides a more complex picture. Wyatt (2026) reports meaningful digital formation alongside participatory differences, while Cornelio-Arias (2026) raises serious concerns about algorithmic mediation and embodied presence. The disagreement is productive because it indicates that mode of participation should be studied as a contextual variable rather than settled by assumption.

Causal inference caution

A fourth limitation concerns causal inference. Evidence that leadership development, engagement, or discipleship correlates with positive outcomes does not establish that a particular program will cause growth in every church. Context, theology, demographics, resources, history, and culture may alter relationships. Rethink Church therefore avoids presenting its dimensions as universal causal laws.

Scarcity of pre-implementation diagnostics

A fifth limitation is the scarcity of integrated pre-implementation diagnostics. Much scholarship explains existing congregations, evaluates interventions, or reflects on observed changes. Less attention is given to a unified assessment conducted before a church launches a branch, digital campus, major program, or leadership restructuring.

Need for testable integration

These critiques support the need for an integrative but testable framework. Rethink Church should be judged not by conceptual breadth alone but by whether its constructs can be defined, measured, interpreted, and used ethically without oversimplifying spiritual life.

LITERATURE GAPS

Integrative gap

The first gap is integrative. Existing research addresses evangelism, discipleship, engagement, leadership, digital ministry, and sustainability, but these constructs are often investigated separately. Church decisions, however, are system decisions: changing one dimension can affect several others. An integrated framework could make these interdependencies more visible.

Temporal gap

The second gap is temporal. Many assessments occur after a problem is recognized. Proactive readiness research asks a different question: what evidence should be examined before expansion or organizational change? This shift from retrospective explanation to prospective diagnosis is central to Rethink Church.

Leadership reproduction gap

The third gap concerns leadership reproduction. Scholarship recognizes discipleship and leadership development, yet churches may still treat pastoral recruitment as separate from member formation. More research is needed on how discipleship pathways produce, or fail to produce, future leaders across different church models.

Hybrid ecclesia gap

The fourth gap concerns hybrid ecclesia. Digital participation is now established enough to require analysis beyond emergency pandemic adaptation. Research needs to examine how digital and physical pathways interact over time, including movement between online participation, local community, service, leadership, and pastoral care.

Methodological gap

The fifth gap is methodological. Integrated church-readiness constructs require mixed methods because numerical patterns alone cannot explain theological meaning, local history, relational dynamics, or reasons for participant behavior. Qualitative accounts alone, however, may make it difficult to compare patterns across dimensions or sites.

Implementation gap

The sixth gap concerns implementation. Even when churches collect surveys or conduct consultations, findings may not translate into clear decision thresholds, developmental priorities, or follow-up assessment. Rethink Church therefore links diagnosis to an implementation cycle while maintaining that decisions remain contextual and leadership-led.

LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

System relationships across literatures

Across the literature, a consistent pattern emerges church sustainability depends on relationships among formation, participation, leadership, and context rather than on a single ministry technique. Discipleship studies emphasize multiple pathways of growth; digital ecclesiology emphasizes mediated forms of community; leadership research emphasizes development and adaptation; and organizational theory emphasizes alignment and systems. The common implication is that isolated interventions are unlikely to explain the whole church system.

Reach and depth distinction

The literature also suggests that reach and depth should be distinguished. Digital media can expand access and support genuine formation, but expanded reach does not automatically create service, leadership, or embodied community (Wyatt, 2026). Similarly, high physical attendance does not automatically demonstrate discipleship depth. A diagnostic framework therefore needs indicators at multiple levels of participation.

Reproduction as downstream outcome

A second synthesis concerns reproduction. Biblical and contemporary leadership perspectives converge on the importance of developing others. Discipleship becomes organizationally consequential when people are equipped to serve, mentor, lead, and commission others. Leadership shortage may therefore be interpreted partly as a downstream indicator of weaknesses earlier in the developmental pathway.

Adaptation with identity

A third synthesis concerns adaptation. Technology, generational change, migration, and networked life require churches to adapt communication and ministry structures. Yet adaptation is sustainable when it remains connected to identity, ethics, and formation. Digital innovation without ecclesial integration may increase activity while weakening coherence.

Systems and feedback loops

A fourth synthesis concerns systems. Socialization, fit, leadership, engagement, and change interact through feedback loops. For example, weak onboarding can reduce engagement; low engagement can shrink the leadership pool; leadership scarcity can increase centralization; centralization can increase burnout; and burnout can weaken discipleship capacity. Systems thinking makes these relationships analytically visible.

Framework as hypothesis

The literature therefore supports the architecture of Rethink Church while not yet validating its specific dimensions. The framework is best understood as a synthesis-generated hypothesis: if churches assess evangelism, formation, engagement, leadership, multiplication, and sustainability together, they may gain a more useful picture of readiness than when each is considered independently. Empirical research is required to test that proposition.

LITERATURE INTEGRATION

Linking literature to research questions

Integration moves beyond synthesis by explicitly connecting the literature to the proposed research questions and diagnostic model. Evangelism literature informs how people encounter the church; discipleship literature informs formation; engagement literature informs belonging and participation; leadership theory informs development and authorization; digital ecclesiology informs contextual modes of participation; and systems theory informs relationships among dimensions.

Socialization integrated with engagement and leadership

Organizational socialization is integrated primarily with Church Engagement and Leadership Development. It explains how participants learn norms, roles, language, and responsibilities. If socialization processes are weak, individuals may attend without understanding how to participate meaningfully or progress toward service and leadership.

Fit integrated with leadership and sustainability

Person-organization fit is integrated with leadership and sustainability. Alignment between individual capabilities, values, and role expectations can affect retention and effectiveness, but the framework treats fit as developmental and ethical rather than exclusionary. Differences can enrich the community when core responsibilities and expectations are clear.

Transformational leadership integration

Transformational leadership is integrated with Spiritual Formation, Leadership Development, and Kingdom Multiplication. Vision and empowerment can mobilize people, while individualized development can help emerging leaders mature. The framework nevertheless requires accountability and distributed capacity so that transformation is not equated with dependence on one charismatic figure.

Systems thinking as integrator

Systems thinking integrates all six dimensions by emphasizing interdependence. A weakness in one dimension may produce symptoms elsewhere, and interventions may create unintended consequences. This perspective supports sequential mixed methods because quantitative patterns can identify system-level relationships while qualitative accounts can explain local mechanisms.

Coherent research logic

The integrated literature therefore produces a coherent research logic: assess the six dimensions, identify patterns, explore explanations, integrate the evidence, and use the resulting interpretation to inform context-specific implementation. This logic directly addresses the research questions without claiming that the literature has already proven the Rethink Church model.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theory definition and church application

Organizational socialization explains how newcomers learn the knowledge, behaviors, and expectations required for participation (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Within Rethink Church, this theory helps analyze movement from initial contact into meaningful community and service.

Formal and informal socialization channels

Churches socialize participants formally through membership classes, discipleship programs, ministry training, policies, and doctrinal teaching, and informally through relationships, observation, language, and cultural norms. Both channels can reinforce or contradict one another.

Digital environments and reduced cues

Socialization is especially important in digital environments because informal cues may be weaker or differently expressed. A remote participant may understand teaching yet remain unclear about pastoral relationships, service opportunities, leadership expectations, or community norms.

Implications for indicators

The theory therefore informs indicators related to onboarding, communication, role clarity, mentoring, and participation. It also helps explain why attendance alone may not lead to integration.

Critical application of socialization

Applied critically, socialization should not demand cultural conformity in areas unrelated to mission or ethics. The goal is understandable participation, not erasure of legitimate diversity.

Expected contribution within the model

Within the model, successful socialization is expected to strengthen engagement and create clearer pathways toward service and leadership, a proposition that future research can test.

Compatibility in church settings

Person-organization fit concerns compatibility between individuals and organizations (Kristof, 1996). In churches, compatibility includes understanding of mission, theology, ethical expectations, role demands, and reciprocal support.

Supplementary and complementary fit

Fit can be supplementary, where values are shared, or complementary, where individual capabilities meet organizational needs. Both forms may matter for ministry teams and leadership appointments.

Fit is not sameness

Rethink Church does not treat fit as sameness. Churches are communities across differences, and diversity can strengthen mission. The relevant issue is whether differences can coexist with responsible commitment to the role and community.

External leader recruitment

Fit is particularly relevant when recruiting leaders from outside a congregation. A technically capable leader may still struggle if expectations, governance, theology, or ministry culture are poorly understood.

Diagnostic use of fit

Diagnostic assessment can therefore examine clarity and alignment before appointment rather than interpreting later conflict solely as personal failure. This shifts attention from blame toward reciprocal expectations and system design.

Fit within framework dimensions

Fit contributes most directly to Leadership Development and Church Sustainability, while interacting with socialization because alignment can develop as people learn and participate.

Transformational concepts and ministry relevance

Transformational leadership emphasizes idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These concepts are relevant to ministry environments in which leaders communicate vision and develop others.

Developmental lens

Rethink Church uses transformational leadership primarily as a developmental lens. Leaders should not merely attract followers; they should increase the capacity of others to think, serve, and lead responsibly.

Intellectual stimulation and adaptation

Intellectual stimulation is relevant to churches navigating social and technological change because inherited practices may require evaluation without abandoning theological commitments. Leaders can create environments in which questions and learning are permitted.

Individualized consideration and discipleship

Individualized consideration supports mentoring and discipleship by recognizing different stages of maturity, gifts, and developmental needs. Standardized programs may provide structure, but personal development requires attention to individual context.

Need for safeguards

The theory also requires critical safeguards. Transformational influence can become unhealthy when vision is inseparable from one personality or when dissent is interpreted as disloyalty. Governance, accountability, and shared leadership remain essential.

Transformational leadership in the model

Within Rethink Church, transformational leadership therefore informs the movement from formation to leadership and commissioning while remaining embedded in broader systems of accountability.

Overarching theoretical logic

Systems thinking provides the overarching theoretical logic for Rethink Church because it focuses on relationships, patterns, feedback, and underlying structures (Senge, 2006). Church outcomes are rarely produced by one variable operating independently.

Events versus patterns

A systems lens encourages leaders to distinguish events from patterns. A sudden volunteer shortage may be an event, but repeated shortages may reflect weak onboarding, unclear roles, insufficient mentoring, or excessive centralization.

Feedback loops in ministry

Feedback loops are particularly important. Strong discipleship can increase service, which expands mentoring capacity, which can strengthen discipleship. Conversely, leadership overload can reduce mentoring, weaken formation, shrink the leadership pipeline, and further increase overload.

Change theory and implementation

Organizational change theory adds attention to implementation. Even well-supported changes can fail when stakeholders do not understand the rationale, resources are insufficient, or new practices conflict with existing routines. Kotter (1996) emphasizes urgency, coalition, vision, communication, empowerment, short-term wins, and institutionalization as change considerations.

Cyclical assessment

Rethink Church therefore uses diagnosis before implementation and reassessment after implementation. The framework is cyclical rather than a one-time scorecard.

Integrated effect of systems and change theory

Together, systems thinking and change theory connect the six diagnostic dimensions and support the shift from reactive correction toward proactive organizational learning.

THE RETHINK CHURCH CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Gospel Outreach

The conceptual pathway begins with Gospel Outreach. Outreach represents intentional witness and invitation through physical, relational, and digital channels. Its diagnostic concern is not only volume of contacts but whether people can move from encounter into understandable next steps.

Centralized Teaching

Centralized Teaching follows as a mechanism for establishing shared theological foundations and reducing fragmentation. Centralization here does not require one speaker or one location; it means that core teaching is coherent enough to support a common identity across branches and digital environments.

Community and Discipleship

Community and Discipleship represent the movement from exposure to belonging and formation. Community provides relational context, while discipleship organizes learning, practice, mentoring, and spiritual development. These stages can overlap and recur.

Spiritual Formation and Leadership Development

Spiritual Formation and Leadership Development deepen the pathway. Formation concerns character, practices, theological maturity, vocation, and service. Leadership development adds supervised responsibility, feedback, role competence, and accountability.

Commissioning and Kingdom Multiplication

Commissioning and Kingdom Multiplication represent responsible sending. Commissioning assumes that readiness has been assessed rather than inferred from enthusiasm alone. Multiplication can include new leaders, groups, ministries, branches, or digital communities.

Sustainable Ecclesia

Sustainable Ecclesia completes the pathway without ending it. A sustainable church reproduces the conditions needed for another cycle of outreach, formation, leadership, and mission. Sustainability therefore functions as both an outcome and a feedback condition.

Evangelism

Evangelism. This dimension examines clarity of outreach strategy, accessibility of entry points, follow-up, conversion pathways, and connection between proclamation and community.

Spiritual Formation

Spiritual Formation. This dimension examines teaching, prayer, Scripture engagement, mentoring, ethical formation, reflective practice, and evidence of developmental pathways.

Church Engagement

Church Engagement. This dimension examines belonging, participation, communication, service, relational connection, and integration across physical and digital settings.

Leadership Development

Leadership Development. This dimension examines identification, training, mentoring, supervised practice, role clarity, accountability, succession, and commissioning.

Kingdom Multiplication

Kingdom Multiplication. This dimension examines reproduction of disciples, leaders, groups, ministries, branches, and mission beyond the originating congregation.

Church Sustainability

Church Sustainability. This dimension examines alignment of mission, governance, leadership capacity, resources, technology, communication, safeguarding, and adaptive learning.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design is proposed for empirical validation of Rethink Church. The design begins with quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by qualitative inquiry designed to explain or contextualize the quantitative results. Integration occurs after both phases rather than assuming that the qualitative phase merely confirms the survey (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Quantitative phase rationale

The quantitative phase is appropriate because the proposed framework contains multiple dimensions that can be operationalized as item sets. Descriptive statistics can identify patterns of perceived strength and weakness, while reliability analysis and exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis can test whether items behave as theorized when sample size permits.

Qualitative phase rationale

The qualitative phase is necessary because church-readiness scores cannot explain local history, theological meaning, interpersonal dynamics, or reasons for participant responses. Semi-structured interviews can explore unexpected results, differences among participant groups, and mechanisms underlying high or low scores.

Sequential connection

Sequential connection will occur by using quantitative findings to select interview topics and, where ethically and methodologically appropriate, participants. For example, dimensions showing unusual divergence across leaders and members may become priorities for qualitative exploration.

Integration approach

Integration will use joint displays or narrative weaving to compare quantitative and qualitative evidence. Results may converge, diverge, or complement one another. Divergence will be treated as analytically meaningful rather than as an error that must be forced into agreement.

Pragmatic orientation

The design is pragmatic because it selects methods according to the research problem while acknowledging that theological and organizational meanings require interpretation. Pragmatism supports combining numerical and narrative evidence without claiming that either form alone captures the whole phenomenon.

Target settings

Future validation should include churches operating in physical, digital, or hybrid forms. Multi-site sampling would be preferable because the framework is intended for use across varied organizational contexts rather than one congregation alone.

Participant eligibility

Participants may include pastors, ministry leaders, volunteers, and adult congregants with sufficient experience to evaluate the church's systems. Eligibility criteria should specify duration of participation and role so that respondents possess relevant knowledge.

Perspective diversity

Sampling should intentionally capture different perspectives. Leaders may perceive communication or readiness differently from members, and digital participants may experience engagement differently from onsite participants.

Pilot and larger validation sampling

For an initial pilot, purposive sampling may be appropriate to test item clarity and feasibility. Larger validation studies should use sample sizes adequate for psychometric analysis and subgroup comparisons.

Anonymization and sensitivity

Churches and participants should be anonymized in research reporting unless explicit authorization and ethical approval support identification. Sensitive organizational findings require particular care because disclosure can affect trust and reputation.

Setting description elements

The setting description should include organizational structure, ministry mode, approximate size, geographic context, and relevant demographic characteristics without revealing unnecessary identifying information.

Positionality and confirmation bias

Researcher positionality is especially important because the framework is developed by the researcher. This creates insight but also potential confirmation bias. The study should explicitly acknowledge the researcher's investment in the model.

Pragmatic interpretive framework

A pragmatic interpretive framework is proposed because the research seeks useful understanding through multiple forms of evidence. Pragmatism permits methodological pluralism while keeping the research questions central.

Ontology and epistemology

Ontologically, the study assumes that church readiness has observable organizational manifestations while also being experienced differently by participants. Epistemologically, knowledge is developed through interaction among measurement, participant interpretation, literature, and researcher analysis.

Axiology and reflexivity

Axiologically, the researcher acknowledges that values are present in the selection of constructs and interpretation of ecclesial outcomes. Reflexive documentation should identify assumptions and decision points throughout the study.

Separation from pastoral authority

The researcher's role should be separated from pastoral authority wherever possible. Participants must understand that participation or nonparticipation will not affect ministry standing, pastoral care, or opportunities.

Bias controls

Bias controls should include standardized procedures, transparent coding, reflexive journaling, peer review of analysis where feasible, and explicit reporting of disconfirming evidence.

Ethics and recruitment procedures

Procedures should begin with ethics approval and any required site permissions. Recruitment materials must explain purpose, eligibility, voluntary participation, confidentiality, time commitment, and withdrawal rights before consent is obtained.

Instrument development and pilot testing

The quantitative instrument should contain items mapped transparently to the six dimensions. Pilot testing should evaluate clarity, redundancy, response burden, and preliminary reliability before broad deployment.

Quantitative analysis plan

Quantitative analysis should begin with data screening and descriptive statistics. Reliability estimates can evaluate internal consistency, while factor analysis may examine dimensional structure if sample size and assumptions are adequate. Group comparisons should be pre-specified and interpreted cautiously.

Qualitative interview analysis

Qualitative interviews should use open-ended questions derived partly from quantitative findings. Interviews should be recorded with consent, transcribed, coded systematically, and analyzed for themes that explain, complicate, or extend survey patterns.

Data synthesis across phases

Data synthesis should explicitly connect phases. A joint display can place quantitative patterns beside qualitative themes and integrated interpretations, making it clear where evidence converges, diverges, or provides complementary insight.

Technology and data security

Technology used for surveys, transcription, coding, or statistical analysis should be documented. Data-security procedures should specify encryption, access controls, retention periods, de-identification, and secure deletion.

Credibility

Credibility can be strengthened through transparent interview protocols, member reflection on summaries where appropriate, triangulation across participant roles, and attention to negative or disconfirming cases.

Transferability

Transferability should be supported through thick description of context rather than claims that findings automatically apply to all churches. Readers need enough contextual information to judge relevance to other settings.

Dependability

Dependability requires an audit trail documenting instrument versions, recruitment, analytic decisions, coding development, and changes made during the study. Replication does not require identical outcomes but should permit understanding of how conclusions were reached.

Confirmability

Confirmability requires deliberate management of researcher bias. Reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, transparent codebooks, and reporting of evidence that challenges the framework can reduce the risk of selectively interpreting data in favor of Rethink Church.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations include voluntary participation, withdrawal rights, confidentiality, safeguarding, secure data storage, and careful handling of criticism involving identifiable leaders or ministries. Power relationships are particularly important when the researcher has pastoral authority.

Avoiding spiritual judgment

Because spiritual life is sensitive, the study should avoid presenting diagnostic scores as judgments of faithfulness or spiritual worth. The instrument assesses organizational and ministry perceptions, not the sincerity of individual belief.

APPLICATION OF THE RETHINK CHURCH DIAGNOSTIC MODEL

Defined decision focus

Application begins with a defined decision rather than a general desire to measure the church. Leaders should specify whether they are considering a new branch, digital campus, leadership restructuring, discipleship redesign, or other major initiative. The diagnostic question then becomes whether current conditions support that decision.

Stakeholder mapping

The second step is stakeholder mapping. Pastors, ministry leaders, volunteers, members, digital participants, and relevant community partners may hold different information. Including multiple perspectives reduces the risk of leadership-only assessment.

Quantitative diagnosis

The third step is quantitative diagnosis across the six dimensions. Results should be interpreted as patterns requiring explanation rather than grades. A low score may indicate a genuine weakness, unclear communication, different expectations, or an item that does not fit the context.

Qualitative explanation

The fourth step is qualitative explanation. Interviews or focus groups can explore why patterns exist, what participants experience, and what conditions leaders may not see. Contradictory evidence should be preserved.

Integrated prioritization

The fifth step is integrated prioritization. Leaders identify which issues are material to the proposed decision, which can be addressed immediately, which require longer development, and which reflect contextual differences rather than deficiencies.

Implementation and reassessment

The final step is implementation and reassessment. Actions should have owners, resources, timelines, and indicators. Reassessment then examines whether conditions changed and whether unintended consequences emerged.

FROM REACTIVE MANAGEMENT TO PROACTIVE DIAGNOSIS

Reactive symptoms versus proactive evidence

Reactive church management begins with symptoms. Attendance declines, leaders resign, conflict emerges, finances tighten, or a branch stalls. Leaders then search for explanations under pressure. Proactive diagnosis seeks evidence before those symptoms become severe.

Meaning of proactivity

Proactivity does not mean predicting the future with certainty. It means identifying plausible readiness conditions and examining them before irreversible commitments are made. This is analogous to due diligence in other organizational contexts while remaining adapted to ecclesial values.

Protection from leader overextension

A proactive approach can also protect leaders from overextension. If leadership-development scores and interviews reveal a narrow pipeline, opening another branch may deepen dependence on existing pastors. The appropriate response may be formation before expansion.

Community architecture over content volume

Likewise, strong digital reach combined with weak engagement may suggest the need for community architecture rather than more content. The diagnostic model changes the question from 'How can we attract more viewers?' to 'How do viewers become known participants, disciples, servants, and leaders?'

Stewardship and early identification

Proactive diagnosis also supports stewardship. Time, finances, volunteer energy, and pastoral attention are limited resources. Earlier identification of misalignment can prevent costly implementation and reduce the human burden of failed initiatives.

Cultural transition

The transition from reactive to proactive practice is therefore cultural as well as technical. Churches must become willing to examine evidence before decisions, discuss weaknesses without shame, and treat learning as part of faithful stewardship.

IMPLEMENTATION AND FEASIBILITY PLAN

Pilot implementation

Implementation should begin with a limited pilot rather than immediate organization-wide adoption. One congregation or ministry unit can test the instrument, interview process, reporting format, and decision usefulness. Pilot feedback should be used to revise ambiguous or burdensome elements.

Stakeholder explanation

Stakeholders should receive a clear explanation of what the diagnostic does and does not do. It does not rank spiritual worth, guarantee growth, replace pastoral discernment, or prescribe one church model. It organizes evidence for reflection and decision making.

Required resources

Resources include a survey platform, secure data storage, analytic capability, trained interviewers, transcription procedures, and time for interpretation. Smaller churches may use simplified descriptive analysis while preserving methodological transparency.

Practical implementation cycle

A practical implementation cycle could span eight to twelve weeks: preparation and permissions, survey administration, preliminary analysis, interviews, integrated analysis, leadership review, action planning, and communication. Research studies would require additional time for ethics and rigorous validation.

Potential barriers and mitigation

Potential barriers include low response rates, fear of criticism, leadership defensiveness, digital access differences, confidentiality concerns, and insufficient analytic expertise. Mitigation strategies include anonymous data collection, transparent communication, independent analysis where feasible, and proportional methods.

Feasibility criterion

Feasibility should be judged by whether the diagnostic produces information that changes understanding or decisions. A technically sophisticated instrument that leaders cannot interpret is less useful than a simpler, valid process connected to action.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Implications for pastors

For pastors, the framework encourages movement from program-centered planning toward pathway-centered planning. The question becomes how each ministry activity contributes to encounter, belonging, formation, service, leadership, or mission.

Implications for multi-site churches

For multi-site churches, the model can help distinguish what should remain centralized from what should be contextualized. Core teaching and governance may require consistency, while outreach, community practices, and service opportunities may need local adaptation.

Digital ministry policy implications

For digital ministry, policy should address pastoral responsibility, safeguarding, privacy, leadership authorization, moderation, data practices, and pathways into meaningful participation. Digital ministry should be governed as ministry, not merely media.

Leadership development policy implications

For leadership development, churches may benefit from written competencies, mentoring expectations, supervised practice, feedback, and commissioning criteria. Such policies can reduce ambiguity and dependence on informal selection.

Implications for denominations and networks

For denominations and networks, aggregated diagnostic research could identify recurring capacity constraints across congregations without publicly ranking churches. Shared findings could inform training, resource allocation, and leadership-development initiatives.

Implications for researchers

For researchers, the framework offers testable constructs and relationships. Future evidence may support, modify, combine, or reject dimensions. That openness to revision is essential if Rethink Church is to function as a scholarly framework rather than a fixed proprietary assertion.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES AND DISSEMINATION

Anticipated outcomes status

Because empirical testing has not yet been completed, outcomes in this article are anticipated rather than reported. The first anticipated outcome is improved visibility into relationships among ministry dimensions that are often considered separately.

Leadership and engagement visibility

A second anticipated outcome is earlier recognition of leadership and engagement constraints. If supported empirically, diagnostic patterns may help churches identify capacity problems before launching expansion.

Digital-ministry planning

A third anticipated outcome is more disciplined digital-ministry planning. Churches may become better able to distinguish reach from relational integration and to design explicit pathways for remote participants.

Organizational learning

A fourth anticipated outcome is improved organizational learning. Repeated assessment can create longitudinal evidence about whether interventions correspond with changes in perceived readiness.

Dissemination channels

Dissemination should include scholarly publication, conference presentation, practitioner reports, and accessible church-leadership resources. Research reports should separate empirical findings from theological interpretation and practical recommendations.

Protection in public reporting

Any public reporting should protect participating churches and avoid competitive rankings. The purpose of dissemination is learning and improvement, not reputational comparison.

LIMITATIONS

Conceptual status limitation

The primary limitation is that Rethink Church is presently conceptual. The proposed dimensions are grounded in literature and theory but have not yet been validated as a measurement model.

Context limitation

A second limitation concerns context. Churches differ by denomination, theology, size, culture, governance, socioeconomic setting, and ministry mode. A framework developed in one context may require adaptation elsewhere.

Self-report limitation

A third limitation concerns self-report data. Participants may answer according to social desirability, loyalty, dissatisfaction, or incomplete knowledge. Multiple roles and qualitative follow-up can reduce but not eliminate this limitation.

Construct boundary limitation

A fourth limitation concerns construct boundaries. Spiritual formation and kingdom multiplication contain theological meanings that may not be fully captured by organizational measurement. Quantification must therefore remain modest about what it represents.

Researcher positionality limitation

A fifth limitation concerns researcher positionality. Because the framework's developer may conduct early studies, confirmation bias is a material risk. Independent replication and external critique will be important.

Usefulness versus causality limitation

Finally, diagnostic usefulness does not establish causal effectiveness. Even if the instrument measures readiness reliably, additional research is needed to determine whether using it improves implementation outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Expert review and cognitive interviewing

Future research should begin with expert review and cognitive interviewing to refine construct definitions and survey items. The goal should be clarity before statistical sophistication.

Pilot and factor-analytic studies

Pilot studies should evaluate internal consistency and item performance, followed by larger studies capable of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Measurement invariance across church types should be examined when sample sizes permit.

Longitudinal research

Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether diagnostic patterns change after interventions and whether changes correspond with ministry outcomes. Cross-sectional studies alone cannot establish developmental trajectories.

Comparative mode-of-ministry research

Comparative research should examine physical, digital, and hybrid congregations without presuming superiority of any mode. Outcomes should include participation, formation, service, leadership, belonging, and sustainability.

Cross-cultural adaptation

Cross-cultural studies are especially important because concepts such as leadership, community, authority, and participation vary across contexts. Instruments should be translated and culturally adapted rather than simply exported.

Independent testing

Independent researchers should be encouraged to test the framework. Evidence that challenges or modifies Rethink Church would strengthen the scholarly process by separating the value of the model from the interests of its originator.

CONCLUSION

Restatement of the practical problem

Rethink Church responds to a practical problem: churches can expand programs, locations, leadership structures, and digital reach without an integrated assessment of whether the underlying ministry system is ready to sustain the change. The framework proposes that readiness should be examined before major implementation rather than only after visible problems emerge.

Interconnected literature findings

The literature demonstrates that discipleship, engagement, leadership, digital ecclesia, and sustainability are interconnected. Digital participation can support genuine formation while presenting distinctive challenges in service, leadership, and embodied community. Leadership development can be understood as an extension of discipleship rather than merely recruitment.

Theoretical integration

The theoretical framework integrates organizational socialization, person-organization fit, transformational leadership, systems thinking, and organizational change. These theories do not define the church's theological identity; they provide analytical lenses for understanding how people, roles, culture, leadership, and systems interact.

Conceptual model summary

The conceptual model organizes ministry development from Gospel Outreach through Centralized Teaching, Community, Discipleship, Spiritual Formation, Leadership Development, Commissioning, Kingdom Multiplication, and Sustainable Ecclesia. Six diagnostic dimensions provide a proposed structure for measurement and interpretation.

Validation pathway and ethics

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design offers a rigorous path for validation. Quantitative evidence can identify patterns, qualitative evidence can explain those patterns, and integration can reveal convergence, divergence, or complementarity. Ethical safeguards and researcher reflexivity are essential because church research involves sensitive relationships and spiritual identities.

Final scholarly claim

Rethink Church should therefore be understood as a testable framework for proactive ecclesial learning, not as a guarantee of growth or a universal formula. Its scholarly value will depend on transparent operationalization, empirical testing, independent critique, contextual adaptation, and demonstrated usefulness in helping churches make more informed and sustainable decisions.

REFERENCES

References

Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). Transformational leadership (2nd ed.). Psychology Press.

Campbell, H. A. (2013). Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds. Routledge.

Campbell, H. A., & Garner, S. (2016). Networked theology: Negotiating faith in digital culture. Baker Academic.

Cornelio-Arias, M. (2026). Incarnational presence as prophetic resistance: A missiological critique of digital church in the algorithmic age. Missiology. https://doi.org/10.1177/00918296261450198

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). Designing and conducting mixed methods research (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th ed.). SAGE.

Darmawan, I. P. A., Tanhidy, J., & Doma, Y. (2024). Youth key persons' digital discipleship process during the pandemic and post-pandemic era. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 80(1).

Francis, L. J., Lankshear, D. W., McKenna, U., Jones, I., & Eccles, E. L. (2026). Assessing pathways and challenges to growth in discipleship: A study among members of the Student Christian Movement in the UK. Journal of Religious Education, 74, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-025-00280-5

Heryanto, H., Pramono, R., Sijabat, M., & Siallagan, T. (2025). Conceptualisation of ideal church leaders in the Society Revolution 5.0. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies.

Hosea, A., Pangaibali, I., Manulang, A. Y., & Harimu, B. P. S. (2024). Digital ecclesiology: Adapting church formation in the digital world. Magnum Opus: Jurnal Teologi dan Kepemimpinan Kristen, 5(2).

Kim, S. (2026). Missional leadership and online community in the era of digital transformation: Exploring models of discipleship practice through theological interpretation and integrative dialogue. Theology of Mission, 82, 44-85. https://doi.org/10.14493/ksoms.2026.2.44

King James Version Bible. (1769/2017). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1611).

Kotter, J. P. (1996). Leading change. Harvard Business School Press.

Kristof, A. L. (1996). Person-organization fit: An integrative review of its conceptualizations, measurement, and implications. Personnel Psychology, 49(1), 1-49.

Kusika, Y., & Tanuwihardja, A. (2026). Transformasi paradigma kepemimpinan gereja dalam komunikasi pastoral dengan Gen Z: Sebuah tinjauan literatur sistematis. Magnum Opus: Jurnal Teologi dan Kepemimpinan Kristen, 8(1).

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Natan, A., Ming, D., & James, J. D. (2025). Digitalization and church leadership: Challenges and opportunities for contemporary evangelism. Jurnal Teologi, 6(1). https://doi.org/10.52489/juteolog.v6i1.246

Senge, P. M. (2006). The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization (Rev. ed.). Doubleday.

South College. (2026). Doctor of Business Administration - Program overview. South College.

Tangkilisan, N. V., Runtuwene, D. E., & Tandayu, A. H. S. (2024). Discipleship as leadership: Kajian terhadap dinamika relasi Yesus dan murid-murid dalam Matius sebagai paradigma baru kepemimpinan pastoral kontekstual. Magnum Opus: Jurnal Teologi dan Kepemimpinan Kristen, 5(2).

Van Maanen, J., & Schein, E. H. (1979). Toward a theory of organizational socialization. Research in Organizational Behavior, 1, 209-264.

Wyatt, J. W. (2026). Digital discipleship and whole-person flourishing: A mixed-methods study at Celebration Church [Doctor of Ministry dissertation, Southeastern University]. FireScholars.

Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (6th ed.). SAGE.

APPENDICES

Appendix A content

Article Element

South College Criterion Adapted

Status

Front matter

APA formatting; clear title; abstract opens with purpose; problem/framework/setting/method/analysis; 4-7 keywords

Completed/adapted for article

Historical context

Evolution over time; historical and current evidence; future constraints

Completed

Social context

Recent evidence explaining organizational/social impact

Completed

Theoretical context

Framework used to analyze problem and scholarship

Completed

Problem statement

Moves general to specific; explicit problem; supported by scholarship

Completed; article uses expanded development

Purpose

Problem, phenomenon, participants/setting, operational definition

Completed as proposed validation study

Significance

Theoretical, empirical, practical significance

Completed

Literature synthesis

Cohesive narrative; not source-by-source annotation; connects knowledge to proposed work

Completed

Framework

Origins/theorists and explanation of how framework guides study

Completed

Research design

Clear design and rationale for data types

Completed

Setting/participants

Population, rationale, setting and future impact

Completed prospectively

Positionality

Motivation, pragmatism, ontology, epistemology, axiology, bias/role

Completed

Procedures

Permissions, recruitment, collection, analysis, synthesis in sequence

Completed prospectively

Data collection	
Collection/recording/analysis rationale; sequence; interview plan	
Completed prospectively	
Trustworthiness	
Credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, ethics	
Completed	
Implementation	
Timeline/process, resources, stakeholders, feasibility	
Completed	
Challenges	
Barriers and mitigation	
Completed	
Implications	
Practice, organizational/policy implications	
Completed	
Expected outcomes	
Predictions based on literature/framework, not fabricated findings	
Completed	
Dissemination	
How findings can be shared for impact	
Completed	
References	
In-text/reference alignment and APA-style reference section	
Completed; final journal copy should undergo reference verification	

MEAL Paragraph Audit

Main point: Each substantive paragraph begins with a controlling idea that advances the section argument.

Evidence: Claims requiring support are connected to scholarly literature, theory, or explicitly identified biblical foundations.

Analysis: Evidence is interpreted rather than merely reported, with attention to implications, limitations, and relationships among constructs.

Link: Paragraphs connect back to the section purpose, research problem, conceptual model, or transition to the next analytical point.

Publication caution: The document is a conceptual article. Statements about future quantitative and qualitative results are framed as proposed or anticipated; no participant findings have been invented.