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Cultivating Trust Within Multinational Ministries

By
Will Savell

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

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Dr. Gregory Perry
Faculty Advisor _____

Dr. Jeffrey David
Second Reader _____

Dr. Joel Hathaway
Director of DMin Program _____

Mr. Steve Jamieson
Library Director _____

Abstract

This study examines the cultivation of trust within multinational Christian ministry teams. The purpose was to investigate how team members cultivate trust in increasingly globalized ministry contexts marked by cultural, linguistic, and theological diversity. Leaders seek unity and ministry effectiveness, but many face challenges in building and sustaining trust across cultural boundaries, resulting in weakened ministry impact.

This study employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with six executive-level ministry leaders who serve in diverse global contexts. The research addressed three questions: how cultural backgrounds and behaviors shape trust dynamics, what personal competencies cultivate trust, and what practices sustain it across cultures. The literature review focused on three areas: the theology of trust, organizational trust, and cross-cultural competencies in ministry leadership.

This study found that trust is cultivated through three primary dynamics: cultural awareness, personal competencies, and intentional practices. Cultural differences in communication and relational expectations significantly shape trust. Key competencies such as humility, empathy, and consistency are essential for building trust across cultures. Additionally, practices such as shared spiritual rhythms, transparent communication, and relational investment sustain trust over time.

This study concludes that trust is more than leadership strategy. It is a relational and spiritual reality shaped by Christ-centered community and Spirit-led practices. By integrating theological foundations, cultural competencies, and intentional practices, ministry leaders can cultivate trust within diverse teams.

"Trust is the central issue in human relationships. Without trust, you can't lead. Without trust, you can't get people to believe in you or each other. Without trust, you can't accomplish extraordinary things."

-James Kouzes and Barry Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*

Contents

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In today's globalized and culturally diverse world, trust is a cornerstone of effective Christian leadership. Trust is foundational for building strong relationships and cohesive teams. It also significantly impacts the overall health and success of an organization. The ability to cultivate and maintain trust becomes essential as Christian leaders strive to guide their ministries through times of complexity and Kingdom opportunity. Author and Associate Professor of Leadership Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary, Todd Bolsiner, proposes that trust is "the organizational air that allows a transforming adventure to be even possible."[1] For Bolsinger, the adventure is the mission of God. He also states, "Only when a leader is deeply trusted can he or she take people further than they imagined into the mission of God."[2] This dissertation explores the important role that trust plays in developing organizational alignment by examining how trust is cultivated within multinational ministry settings.

Trust within leadership is a necessary trait for the growth of any organization. Educator, author, and speaker Steven Covey, with co-author Rebecca Merrill, highlight that "Trust truly is the one thing that changes everything."[3] Covey argues that trust "…impacts us 24/7, 365 days a year. It undergirds and affects the quality of every

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[1] Tod E. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (InterVarsity Press, 2018), 15.

[2] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 15.

[3] Stephen M. R. Covey and Rebecca R. Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (Free Press, 2008), 26.

relationship, every communication, every work project, every business venture, every effort in which we are engaged."[4] Within Christian ministry, trust forms the foundation upon which communities of faith are built and nurtured. However, many ministries with multinational teams have diverse cultural and theological backgrounds, which present challenges to the development of trust. Since the dynamics of ministry leadership often involve guiding followers of Christ in their journeys of faith, a high level of trust is required between leaders and their constituents. Furthermore, the increasing globalization and diversity within ministries requires ministry leaders to develop competencies that enhance their ability to build trust across various cultural groups.

In multinational ministries, the potential for harm becomes present when trust is lacking. The absence of strong trust can lead to doubts, conflicts, and a breakdown in areas of ministry, such as communication. These breakdowns are particularly harmful in a context where cultural differences already present challenges to team interaction. Furthermore, the lack of trust can result in a weakened sense of belonging among members, which could also lead to disengagement and lowered ministry impact. Without trust, leaders may struggle to inspire and motivate their teams. This may suppress curiosity and innovation and hinder the ministry's ability to adapt to complex challenges. In *The Leadership Challenge*, James Kouzes, Fellow of the Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University, and Barry Posner, Professor of Leadership and Chair of the Management and Entrepreneurship Department at the Leavey School of Business, recognize the essential need for trust, noting, "Trust is the central issue in human

[4] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust*, 1.

relationships…Without trust, you can't get people to believe in you or each other. Without trust, you can't accomplish extraordinary things."[5]

The consequences of not cultivating trust extend beyond the immediate relationships between team members. Such failure can negatively impact various aspects of the ministry, including the broader community and the constituents they serve. For example, in an education ministry, when trust is not established between the leadership and a group of students, the growth of the learning community can be compromised. Students may become skeptical of the decisions made by facilitators and directors, and this could lead to divisions within the local learning environments. Furthermore, staff members who do not trust their leaders may experience lower job satisfaction or higher turnover rates, and both of these consequences could destabilize the ministry. In a broader educational network, for example, a lack of trust can damage the ministry's reputation, which would hinder the ability to effectively support new students or partner with other ministries. These consequences raise an important question about why trust is so difficult to cultivate within organizational leadership, even when the importance of trust is widely acknowledged.

Although humility is generally considered an important competency for effective leadership, it is not modeled in contemporary organizational cultures. Instead, contemporary cultures often reward traits that are in contrast to the cultivation of trust. Many times, leaders are selected and promoted for their decisiveness, confidence, technical problem-solving skills, and the ability to project certainty in complex

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[5] James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, 6th ed. (John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 198.

environments. While these qualities contribute to short-term productivity, they also discourage curiosity, listening, and relational dependence. As a result, humility is often affirmed in principle but underdeveloped in practice. This context leaves leaders underprepared to navigate complex relationships, especially in cross-cultural ministry contexts where trust must be intentionally cultivated.

This study addresses the foundational issue of trust in organizational leadership within multinational Christian ministries. Many ministries face inherent challenges due to the diverse cultural and theological backgrounds of their members. These differences can create barriers to building strong, trust-based relationships. However, when trust is effectively cultivated, it fosters an aligned vision and empowers team members to work together more effectively. The gap in understanding how to cultivate trust among diverse cultural groups remains a significant challenge for many ministry leaders. This dissertation aims to bridge that gap by exploring theology, organizational dynamics, and cultural competencies for building trust in leadership, with a focus on the context of multinational Christian ministry.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to investigate how team members cultivate trust within multinational ministries. To examine this aspect properly, the following research questions guided interviews with six ministry leaders serving in decision-making, executive positions.

Research Questions

The following research questions (RQ) guide the qualitative research:

1. RQ1: How do the cultural backgrounds and behaviors of team members shape trust dynamics in multinational ministry teams?
2. RQ2: What personal competencies are needed from members within a multinational context to cultivate trust?
3. RQ3: What intentional practices do multinational ministry teams use to cultivate and sustain trust across cultural boundaries?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study on cultivating trust within multinational ministry teams addresses important aspects of ministry effectiveness and teamwork. This research aims to enhance the reader's understanding of how trust can be cultivated and maintained in culturally diverse ministry contexts. This subject is of increasing relevance in today's globalized world. By focusing on team members of multinational ministries, the study seeks to provide insights that are relevant to teams working in diverse cultural settings with the goal of helping organizations build a more effective ministry environment.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on organizational trust within ministry contexts. Trust is a foundational component of any successful organization. Its importance is magnified in ministry settings where teamwork is essential. In *The Advantage*, Patrick Lencioni, leadership expert, founder, and president of The Table Group, names five behavioral principles that team members must possess within an organization: building trust, mastering conflict, achieving commitment, embracing

accountability, and prioritizing results.[6] He organizes these characteristics like a pyramid, with trust as the foundation. He describes this core principle first, highlighting that trust is "…by far the most important of the five because it is the foundation for the others."[7] By exploring how team members in multinational ministries cultivate trust, this study provides valuable information that can help ministry leaders understand the dynamics of trust-building in diverse cultural contexts. This understanding is important for creating a trusting environment, which can enhance the overall effectiveness of the ministry.

The study's focus on the personal competencies that are needed to cultivate trust in multinational ministry contexts highlights the importance of relational capacities. This research identifies key competencies, such as humility, empathy, differentiation, and communication, along with others that are essential for building trust in culturally diverse teams. Missiologist and author of *Leading Across Cultures*, Richard Plueddemann states, "It is not enough to have knowledge of cultural differences or to be experts in the mysteries of leadership techniques."[8] Instead, he argues that the leader's capacity to love is the more effective means of cultivating trust. By emphasizing these competencies, this study offers practical guidance for ministry team members on how to develop and apply these skills in their daily interactions. This practice can lead to more alignment and better productivity and also foster more respect among team members.

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[6] Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* (Jossey-Bass, 2012), 26.

[7] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 37.

[8] Jim Plueddemann, *Leading across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (IVP Academic, 2009), 215.

This study has meaningful implications for the development of training programs for ministry leaders. The insights from the findings can improve the preparation of future ministry leaders by equipping them with a deeper understanding of the many complexities that are part of multinational ministry work. The findings can also inform the design of training curricula that focus on cultural competencies that can help ensure that ministry personnel are prepared and equipped to handle the challenges of working in diverse cultural settings. Such training programs can be implemented at various stages of a ministry leader's career. From initial training to ongoing professional development, implementing these findings can help to foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement. The emphasis on cultivating trust within multinational ministry settings can lead to the development of new courses or workshops that are focused on building and maintaining trust across cultural boundaries. This course development can include training and coaching on communication strategies, conflict resolution, leadership styles, and personal competencies that are associated with different cultural groups. As a result, ministry leaders will be better equipped to lead diverse teams that foster unity within their organizations.

In summary, the integration of this study's findings into an organization's training offers practical tools and strategies that enhance the effectiveness of ministry practices in multinational contexts. The approach to this topic ultimately contributes to the growth and success of global ministry work by aiding leaders to be better prepared to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of those they serve.

Definition of Terms

The key terms of this study are defined as follows:

1. **Trust**: The confidence placed in the leadership's integrity, reliability, and capability to guide the organization towards its goals.
2. **Team Members**: Decision-making leadership within the executive levels of the organization.
3. **Organizational Trust**: The level of trust that exists within an organization, particularly between leaders and their teams.
4. **Multinational Ministry**: A Christian ministry that operates across multiple countries and cultures and that encounters diverse theological, cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds among its members.
5. **Inter-Cultural Ministry**: Ministry practices that involve interacting with and serving people from different cultural backgrounds.
6. **Cultural Diversity**: The existence of different cultural or ethnic groups within an organization. In the context of this study, cultural diversity refers to the differences in cultural backgrounds, practices, perspectives, and values that team members must navigate to cultivate trust.
7. **Cultural Competencies**: The abilities and skills that help team members to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across different cultures.
8. **Personal Competencies**: The individual qualities and abilities required to effectively build trust within a team, especially in a culturally diverse context.

9. **Theological Differences**: Variations in religious beliefs and interpretations within a Christian context that can arise due to differing cultural, denominational, or doctrinal backgrounds.
10. **Conflict Resolution**: The process of resolving disagreements in a way that fosters or restores trust.
11. **Contextualized Communication**: Communication practices that are adapted to the cultural context of the audience.
12. **Humility:** A Christ-shaped posture of self-forgetfulness in which one submits to God and prioritizes others over oneself.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This study explores how team members cultivate trust within multinational ministries. By exploring the role of trust in organizational leadership, this literature review investigates three areas that shape trust within multinational ministry contexts. First, the theology of trust, with examples from the Book of Acts, examines the biblical foundations that support the concept of trust. Second, organizational trust focuses on the dynamics of trust within formal groups by exploring how structures, processes, and relational factors contribute to a trustworthy environment. Finally, cultural competency addresses the ability of leaders to engage and lead diverse groups. This section will highlight how cultural awareness and sensitivity contribute to building trust. These three areas provide a framework for understanding how trust can be cultivated in multinational ministry leadership.

Theology of Trust with Examples from the Book of Acts

The biblical foundation of trust begins with the character of God and not human competence. Scripture presents the Lord as the faithful covenant initiator whose promises establish the framework for all redemptive history. In Deuteronomy 7:9, Israel is reminded, "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love."[9] Divine faithfulness is rooted in the fact that God binds Himself to His people and provides order for their life. Reformed systematic theologian

[9] Deut. 7:9 (ESV).

Michael Horton emphasizes that this covenant theology is the concrete pattern by which God forms a people. He proposes that the context of covenant is "a concrete community life framed, criticized, normed, and corrected by a divinely prescribed pattern of existence."[10] Trust is a response to God's self-commitment. The God who gives promises also sustains the relationships that are established by those promises. Horton notes that even when humanity proves unfaithful "the promise-making and promise-keeping God will not let the web fall apart."[11] This divine reliability precedes and also sustains the covenant community.

Reformed biblical theologian O. Palmer Robertson gives more insight to this understanding by defining covenant as "a bond in blood sovereignly administered."[12] A covenant is not a casual agreement. Rather, it is a life-and-death commitment that is initiated by God Himself. From the beginning of creation, God binds Himself to humanity in sovereign grace. After the disobedience that led to the Fall (Genesis 3), He graciously reestablishes this bond by committing to redeem a people for His name. From creation to consummation, the bond of the covenant determines the relationship between God and His people. Therefore, trust is grounded in God's own willingness to enter into a binding commitment. The Old Testament concept of *ḥesed* further explains the relational depth of this covenantal faithfulness. Biblical scholar Karen H. Nelson, in her study *Ḥesed and the New Testament*, explains that *ḥesed* describes loyalty expressed within a trusting relationship, particularly "when the situationally powerful party meets the current

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[10] Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 18.

[11] Horton, *God of Promise*, 9.

[12] O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (P & R Publishing, 1981), 4.

essential need of the situationally needy party."[13] This loyalty is based on dependable action that is rooted in an earlier promise rather than being established only on God's sentiment toward a group of people. It expects mutual obligation within the relationship and anticipates reciprocal faithfulness.[14] When Scripture declares that God abounds in *ḥesed*, it presents Him as the one who consistently acts in accordance with His covenant commitments. His trustworthiness is demonstrated in concrete acts of redemption.

Reformed systematic theologian Louis Berkhof sets this trustworthiness within the relationship of God's love and faithfulness to His people when he states, "It is just this immediate consciousness of love to God, of trust and confidence in Him...that prompts the spontaneous cry, arising from the depths of the soul, 'Abba, Father.' It is a human cry, but a cry of divine origin, born of the Spirit of God."[15] Trust, therefore, is not merely intellectual or philosophical, but it is a Spirit-born response to the steadfast faithfulness of God. Since God has bound Himself to His people in covenant love, the believer's trust mirrors divine trustworthiness and serves as a relational bridge between the divine and finite. Unfortunately, this harmony found in relationships in the beginning was not preserved due to a rebellion against the covenant initiator.

One of the tragedies of sin is that it shattered relational trust. In Genesis 3, the serpent's question, "Did God actually say?"[16] introduced suspicion into the human heart. As theologians Peter O'Brien and Andreas J. Köstenberger observe, "sin begins with

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[13] Karen Nelson, *Ḥesed and the New Testament: An Intertextual Categorization Study* (Eisenbrauns, 2023), 1.

[14] Nelson, *Ḥesed and the New Testament*, 1.

[15] Louis Berkhof, *The Assurance of Faith* (Monergism Books, 2018), 62–63.

[16] Gen. 3:1.

doubt regarding the trustworthiness of God's character, which then leads to the desire for independence from him, and this results in direct disobedience."[17] Trust was replaced by doubt, and relationships were torn by self-reliance. In *Creation Regained*, reformed philosopher and author Albert Wolters captures this cosmic break: "The effects of sin touch all of creation; no created thing is in principle untouched by the corrosive effects of the fall...the good handiwork of God has been drawn into the sphere of human mutiny against God."[18] Adam and Eve's betrayal of God ultimately affected every part of life, including its social, phycological, cultural, and organizational dimensions.

Dr. Gregory Perry, New Testament scholar and President of Thirdmill Seminary, describes the same occurrence through the lens of vocation and image-bearing in *The Drama of Discipleship*: "In relation to the five roles of image-bearing...sin alienates every relationship and corrupts every role."[19] The fall was not only a moral failure but the collapse of trust across every aspect of creation's design. Distrust now infects worship, family, work, culture, and citizenship which are the very relationships that once reflected divine faithfulness. This broken trust is not only vertical but horizontal. Humanity's suspicion toward God breeds mistrust among people. As history unfolds, this relational fracture reveals itself in violence and deception and also in subtle forms of mistrust that include miscommunication, power imbalances, displays of pride, and various relational

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[17] Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (IVP Academic, 2001), 27.

[18] Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 53–54.

[19] Gregory R. Perry, *The Drama of Discipleship* (Cascade Books, 2022), 46.

fractures. The human heart was designed for covenantal fidelity. It now leans toward self-protection. Within relationships, sin transforms trust into attempts to maintain control.

The Gospel story is one of restoration of all that was separated. In the covenant of grace, God acts to reestablish trust by revealing Himself as the faithful covenant keeper despite human unfaithfulness. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the decisive act of divine reliability. God's Word became flesh and entered a world marked by distrust to redeem it from within. Paul's most focused theological expression of this example appears in Philippians 2:1–11. The apostle's appeal to unity in verses 1–4 stands in contrast to "selfish ambition" and "conceit" attitudes that fracture a Christian community. As American theologian Gordon Fee observes, Paul's appeal is reinforced by the example of Christ. He displayed the opposite of such self-centeredness by "pouring himself out" in taking the form of a servant and humbling himself to the point of death for the sake of others.[20] Christ's act of humility is more than an example for Christian life and ethics; it is the foundation for them.

Fee further notes that humility in this passage must not be confused with false modesty. Rather, it reflects "the stance of the creature before the Creator, utterly dependent and trusting."[21] This stance contrasts relying on personal strength or manipulation. True humility is not self-focused, but rather, it turns outward, looking "not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others."[22] In the Greco-Roman context that regarded humility as weakness, Paul presents it as a distinctly Christian virtue shaped

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[20] Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1995), 106.

[21] Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians Commentary*, 118.

[22] Phil. 2:4

by Christ Himself. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* also underscores that humility was not highly regarded in Greek literature,[23] yet it stands at the center of a Christian community. The Philippians passage hinges on two decisive movements when Christ "made himself nothing" and "humbled himself." The language of self-emptying, drawn from the verb *ekenōsen*,[24] does not suggest a subtraction of deity but an intentional and voluntary denial of status and privilege. Authority and power were not erased but expressed through obedient service.

This portrayal of humility culminates in exaltation. Drawing from the Old Testament where the prophet Isaiah wrote, "By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return; To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance,"[25] Paul declares that every knee will bow at the name of Jesus. By applying this language, originally reserved for Yahweh, to Christ, Paul affirms that the crucified and exalted Jesus now receives universal loyalty. Jesus is the One who humbled Himself in the ultimate way, and he is the One to whom all creation will bow their knee and submit. The restoration that was inaugurated in Christ in his humility is also covenantal in nature. Professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary, Nijay Gupta, in his book *Paul and the Language of Faith*, connects this restoration to the New Covenant by noting that "Within this construct, faith has less to do with theological ideas per se than with the nature and integrity of a relationship of trust."[26] The new covenant

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[23] Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Ephesians - Philemon*, Vol. 11 (Regency Reference Library, 1978), 122.

[24] Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 123.

[25] Isa. 45:23.

[26] Nijay K. Gupta, *Paul and the Language of Faith* (Eerdmans, 2020), 12.

fulfilled in Christ demonstrates covenantal fidelity that is grounded in divine faithfulness. This trustworthiness invites believers into a relationship that is rooted in trust and sustained by grace.

The biblical narrative of trust moves from divine faithfulness to human rebellion to redemptive restoration. God's unchanging character of faithfulness establishes covenantal security. Sin fractured relational trust. Christ's obedient humiliation and exaltation that followed restored the possibility of faithful relationships through the Holy Spirit's work. The church in Acts continues this theological trajectory by demonstrating that trust is the foundation of faithful ministry.

The Book of Acts provides historical narratives about the nature of community and leadership. Its pages contain a diverse and growing church that was often vulnerable while it tried to navigate the multicultural realities within a covenantal framework. Trust emerged as the early church engaged in relational conflict, shared resources, formed new leadership structures, and operated across cultural and theological boundaries. The Book of Acts also connects the vision of the newly formed church with the practical nature of leadership within a multinational context. Luke, the author, presents Spirit-led communities that function within diversity. He presents trust as the fruit of humility, shared experiences, advocacy, and courageous decision-making. Therefore, the Book of Acts serves as a lasting message for today's multinational ministry teams that navigate the complexities of language, culture, history, and identity.

The rest of this section explores six episodes in the Book of Acts. Each provides a lens to understand how trust can be cultivated, sometimes fractured, and restored in the life of ministry teams. Through these passages, insights are drawn from a variety of

sources, including both classical and contemporary Christian voices, such as John Calvin, Gordon Fee, F.F. Bruce, Herman Bavinck, I. Howard Marshall, Craig Keener, Gregory Perry, and Esther Chung. The following reflections do not aim to reduce trust to a simple strategy or a tool for manipulation. Instead, they highlight how trust was cultivated through presence, discernment, humility, and shared resources and practices in a Spirit-led, covenant community. Within organizations that experience multicultural complexities, the Book of Acts provides a framework for building trust that is rooted in covenant truth.

Building Community and Embracing Fellowship: Acts 2:42–47

The early church's commitment to community and fellowship was portrayed in Acts 2:42–47 when Luke wrote, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers…And all who believed were together and had all things in common."[27] Luke's description reveals a portrait of shared life in which trust was cultivated through the lived rhythms of communal faith. He described more than an enthusiastic group of like-minded people. Carl Holladay, American scholar of the New Testament, notes that *koinonia* in verse 42 "suggests fellowship that goes beyond meeting together and simply being in each other's presence." Instead, it involves "the mutual sharing of such tangible resources as food, clothing, living space, and money, as well as nontangibles—beliefs, ideas, opinions, encouragement, and emotional support."[28] Fellowship was not an abstract idea of unity,

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[27] Acts 2:42-47

[28] Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 108.

but a tangible trust that was expressed through shared possessions and convictions. Their steadfast devotion to the teachings of the Apostles, mutual support, hospitality, and prayer created a network of relationships through which trust was cultivated. Luke's reference to "the breaking of bread" also reinforces that the nature of this fellowship extended beyond a spiritual act. Holladay notes that Eucharistic meals may be in view, but the phrase "they took nourishment" (*metelambanon trophēs*) suggests regular meals.[29] Therefore, the early church's trust was cultivated through doctrinal agreement and corporate prayer as well as through its members regularly sharing their tangible life together.

The communal life of the early church reflected much more than cooperation. It was the visible expression of a Spirit-formed unity that was grounded in the Triune God. Dutch theologian and philosopher, Herman Bavinck, explains that believers "have one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all," and likewise "one Spirit, in whose fellowship they live, by whom they are regenerated, baptized into one body, and united with Christ." This unity does not erase the diversity found in the Church. Rather, "in this oneness the Spirit does not undo the diversity that exists among believers but rather maintains and confirms it."[30] Bavinck traces this pattern to Pentecost when the Spirit "communicated himself with all his charismata to the church of Christ."[31] These gifts, whether extraordinary or ordinary, are distributed by the Spirit not for private possession but for communal benefit. They "serve for the upbuilding of the church" and must be

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[29] Holladay, *Acts*, 108.

[30] Herman Bavinck et al., *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* (Baker Academic, 2003), 138.

[31] Bavinck et al., *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:138.

used "for the benefit and enrichment of the other members" and are always "subordinate to love, which is the most excellent gift."[32] The passage in Acts demonstrates how The Holy Spirit's work creates a community that is not marked by sameness but by interdependent service for one another.

This love, Bavinck argues, arose from the shared participation in Christ. Therefore, it surpasses natural affection. The members of Jesus's church "are mutually brothers and sisters…They are children of one family. God is their Father; Christ is their eldest brother." Believers are called to "serve each other with all their spiritual and natural gifts." The church, therefore, is a communion of saints whose unity is covenantal and whose shared life flows from divine grace.[33] Within such a fellowship, restored trust in God produces a restored trust among His people. Their common life became a living testimony to the faithfulness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Twentieth-century Welsh pastor and preacher, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, captured this same depth of community by highlighting that "True fellowship is never anything superficial. It is deep. It is vital. It becomes the main thing in life." For Lloyd-Jones, fellowship was far more than a friendly handshake in the church hallways. It was "a deep association," even "a close relationship of which the highest example is marriage." This fellowship involved entering into communion with one another in such a way that the Christian community becomes central. Lloyd-Jones noted, "When people become Christians, they become one.

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[32] Bavinck et al., *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:138.

[33] Bavinck et al., *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:138.

They enter community. They are in a family together. They are united by certain bonds that are indissoluble."[34]

In contemporary multinational ministries, this call to shared life remains just as important. Trust is not cultivated by strategy alone, but by fostering relational cultures that are shaped by the Gospel. Shared meals and corporate worship are not add-ons. They are essential practices that make trust visible across generational, ethnic, linguistic, and theological lines. Dr. Gregory Perry underscores the significance of community as the essential context for discipleship. He notes that the early church's devotion to fellowship was not a social arrangement but a profound theological expression of the Gospel's transformational power. Describing their shared rhythms, he writes, "They are a people of fellowship, not soloists, acting as good-faith partners in the everyday stuff of life, like breaking bread, hosting guests, and sharing other goods."[35] For those in the early church, those routine expressions of faithfulness became the foundation upon which trust could flourish.

For leaders in today's multicultural contexts, this insight is important. Trust grows through shared life. Drawing from Perry's work, ministry leaders can foster environments where shared rhythms, such as communal worship, collective service, hospitality, and prayer, create spaces to build community. In the early church, these practices functioned as visible signs of the Kingdom that connected cultures and created unity even within diverse contexts. A modern example of such fellowship is found in the Lausanne Movement. Since 1974, Lausanne has gathered global leaders across theological and

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[34] Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authentic Christianity*, Studies in the Book of Acts (Crossway, 2000), 137–38.

[35] Perry, *Drama of Discipleship*, 105.

cultural lines for the sake of world evangelization. Much like the church in Acts, the Lausanne gatherings emphasize shared belief and mission as the cornerstone of trust. The 2010 Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization offered a powerful image of this reality: "The Closing Ceremony took the form of a special musical setting of the Kenyan service of Holy Communion. The Right Revd. Henry Luke Orombi, Archbishop of Uganda, presided. The bread and wine were served around the hall using communion sets borrowed from a hundred local churches around the world…"[36] This simple, yet profound act of sharing communion across languages and traditions served as a tangible reminder that trust can be strengthened where the Gospel is embodied in shared life.

Acts 2:42–47 provides more than a sentimental glimpse into early Christian community and fellowship. It provides a theological lesson that trust is rooted in shared faith, shared rhythms, and shared resources. For today's global ministries, the lesson should be learned that cultivating trust is not a program. Rather, it is an intentionally shared communal practice that is the result of a Gospel-shaped community where believers commit to living as those who truly "have all things in common." As Lloyd-Jones reminds us, "It is not just meeting occasionally in a church building, shaking hands at the end of a service or meeting, and going home."[37]

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[36] Third Lausanne Congress, "The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action," n.d., 123–24, accessed June 5, 2025, https://lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/The-Cape-Town-Commitment-—-Pages-20-09-2021.pdf.

[37] Lloyd-Jones, *Authentic Christianity*, 137.

Creating Unity Through Generosity: Acts 4:32–37

The early church's example of unity and generosity is highlighted in Acts 4:32–37: "Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common."[38] In these verses, Luke presents a community that was connected by an intentional commitment to one another's well-being. In the first century, identity was often tied to ethnicity. The early believers chose to define themselves by their union in Christ and their identity as his witnesses. The result was a culture of generosity where personal resources were laid at the feet of the leadership to provide for the entire community. Holladay notes that "a community that claimed no private ownership but sharing 'everything in common' embodied ideals that were also valued in Greek and Roman philosophical traditions."[39] However, in Acts, this communal posture was not rooted in philosophy or idealism but in the real experience of the risen Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. In this sort of environment, trust was not a mere concept. It was an experienced reality. Associate Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Patrick Schreiner, notes that this "unity in the Spirit serves as the basis for their sharing of possessions." The phrase "everything in common" (*hapanta koina*) was used in "Hellenistic friendship contexts" to describe the "ideal human gathering." Luke's use of the phrase also "alludes to when God promised to give the people singleness of heart and action in the new

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[38] Acts 4:32.

[39] Holladay, *Acts*, 134.

covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:26)…"[40] Luke presents a Spirit-formed covenant fulfillment in a time imagined by Hellenistic philosophers as the ideal society.

Rather than this kind of unity being the product of organizational strategy or forced alignment, it is a theological conviction rooted in the covenantal teachings of Moses. The early Christians understood that belonging to the people of God came with mutual responsibility. In Deuteronomy 15, Moses instructed the Israelites to extend generosity at the end of every seventh year to ensure that poverty would not become normal within the covenant community. He commanded that this kindness be extended without grudge and from a gracious heart. Reformed biblical scholar and professor, Simon J. Kistemaker, emphasizes this connection when he writes about the early church members in comparison to those in the days of Moses, "They do so by sharing their material possessions and demonstrate their willingness not to claim them as their own. They are mindful of the divine instruction not to have any poor among God's people (compare Deut. 15:4)."[41]

Shaped by these covenantal doctrines and filled with the Holy Spirit, the early Christians developed a transformational understanding of ownership. The evangelical New Testament scholar and commentator F.F. Bruce observes, "The Spirit-filled community exhibited a remarkable unanimity which expressed itself even in the attitude to private property."[42] He adds, "Members regarded their private estates as being at the

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[40] Patrick Schreiner, *Acts: The Christian Standard Commentary*, (Holman Reference, 2022), 113.

[41] Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts: Exposition of the Actos Fo the Apostles*, New Testament Commentary (Baker Book House, 1992), 173.

[42] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 2009), 100.

community's disposal; those who owned houses or lands sold these in order that they might be more conveniently available to the community in the form of money."[43] The gifts of God, whether material or spiritual, are to be entrusted for communal benefit. Luke is careful to clarify that this generosity was not coerced or seen as a type of economic socialism. Instead, it was the natural overflow of Gospel transformation. The early Church's understanding and conviction of grace had deeply influenced their view of ownership to the point where they cultivated a deep sense of trust and mutual dependence.

Even within this Spirit-filled community, mistrust existed. Luke places the account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 in sharp contrast to the generosity of Barnabas at the close of Chapter 4. As *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* observes, "the case of Ananias and Sapphira is opposite that of Barnabas, though it was meant to look the same."[44] While Barnabas freely offered his gift for the good of the community, Ananias and Sapphira attempted to show the same outward generosity while concealing their deception. Their attempt to imitate generosity without genuine commitment revealed that unity and generosity are not automatic byproducts of life shared together. True generosity must be authentically cultivated. The story likely circulated among believers as "a warning of the awfulness of deceit"[45] during seasons of spiritual enthusiasm when integrity might be assumed. Luke's inclusion of this episode highlights the sobering

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[43] Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 101.

[44] Frank Ely Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary. Vol. 9: John - Acts* (Pickering & Inglis, 1981), 313.

[45] Gaebelein, *John / Acts Commentary*, 313.

reality that trust is fragile. Even in the most Gospel-centered communities, it must be nurtured and continually guarded.

For today's multinational ministries, these lessons are more than Bible stories - they are practical lessons. Cultures differ significantly in how they perceive generosity, ownership, and their responsibility to their community. Some cultures emphasize personal stewardship and privacy, while others embrace collective sharing and visible generosity. Instead of ignoring these differences, team members must cultivate a culture where generosity is both contextually sensitive and biblically grounded. Modern-day examples are helpful. Proactive support for under-resourced constituents becomes an indicator that trust is practiced. In such spaces, generosity becomes the soil where trust can grow and thrive. One modern ministry that reflects this spirit is Third Millennium Ministries (Thirdmill). Founded with the goal of providing free, high-quality theological education to church leaders across the globe, Thirdmill has removed the financial barriers that often limit access to learning. Its open-handed posture of offering seminary-level curriculum without charge embodies a Gospel ethic of generosity. Rather than positioning itself as a gatekeeper of theological knowledge, it is a steward that offers its resources to strengthen the Church. In doing so, Thirdmill echoes the pattern of Acts 4, where those with more resources shared freely with those in need.

This kind of generosity is transformational. Just as Barnabas' gift in Acts 4:36–37 demonstrated that he was an encouraging and trustworthy leader, modern acts of sacrificial giving build credibility. In multinational teams, generosity cultivates an environment of grace, which is essential for trust to flourish. Acts 4:32–37 presents a understanding of a covenant community who share their identity with Christ and,

therefore, an environment where unity and generosity are inseparable. However, the story of Ananias and Sapphira is a sober reminder that trust can be fractured by self-interest and counterfeit generosity. For leaders today, especially those serving across cultures, trust must be cultivated through open-hearted and mission-focused generosity.

Displaying Leadership in Resolving Conflict: Acts 6:1–7

Acts 6:1–7 presents one of the earliest conflicts within the life of the church. Rather than a theological difference, this conflict involved a cultural and ethnic tension. Luke writes, "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution."[46] This complaint exposed a fracture within the growing Christian community, and it threatened to damage the relational trust that had been recently cultivated. In a church that was marked by generosity and unity, this oversight concerning "daily distributions" exposed a tangible issue that not all needs were being met. The distinction between Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews) and Hebrews (Aramaic-speaking Jews) went deeper than language. It reflected a broader distinction of cultures and identities. F.F. Bruce explains that "The Hellenists were Jews whose native language was Greek and who attended Greek-speaking synagogues…Many of the Hellenists had affinities with the lands of the Jewish dispersion around the Mediterranean shores, whereas the Hebrews were Palestinian Jews…There were doubtless several minor social and cultural differences between the two groups."[47] Simon J. Kistemaker affirms

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[46] Acts 6:1.

[47] Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 120.

these cultural differences, noting that "The Aramaic-speaking Christians in Jerusalem were in the majority and the Greek-speaking believers formed a minority. Although harmony and unity were the characteristics of the Christian church, linguistic and cultural differences caused inevitable separation."[48]

Even though the early Christian community was united in faith, they brought cultural baggage into real life situations. The issue at hand was a practical one. Widows were one of the most vulnerable groups in that society, and daily food rations were not being distributed equally. As Bruce further notes, "Widows naturally formed a considerable proportion of the poorer members of the church, and the Hellenistic widows were said to be at a disadvantage…perhaps because the distribution of charity was in the hands of the 'Hebrews.'"[49] The unfair distribution could have begun as a logistical oversight, but this information is not disclosed to the reader. However, by Chapter 6, the unequal distribution was experienced as systemic injustice. This context highlights how even Spirit-led, covenant communities are not immune to cultural misdeeds. The apostles were therefore called into a moment of conflict resolution and leadership.

Their response to the situation was wise and culturally sensitive. They did not defend themselves nor dismiss the complaint. Instead, they acknowledged the issue and proposed a solution to appoint "seven men of good repute"[50] to oversee the distribution in an equitable manner. This leadership decision was meaningful and wise, and this wisdom is demonstrated by the men that were chosen: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor,

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[48] Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 221.

[49] Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 120.

[50] Acts 6:3.

Timon, Paramenas, and Nicolausand. Their Greek names indicate Hellenistic identity. Bruce takes this point even further: "All seven appear to have been Hellenists (this conclusion does not rest merely on the fact that they all have Greek names); indeed, they were probably recognized leaders of the Hellenists in the church." The apostles' decision is unique because they entrusted leadership roles to the group that had raised the concern. Their decision was also more than simple delegation. The apostles provided restorative leadership marked by humility and representation - two competencies needed in cultivating trust.

This passage underscores a truth that conflict is inevitable within multinational ministries. The leader's wise response is what matters the most. In this case, the apostles' humility and wisdom was not only a practical action that eased the tension but also one that strengthened the framework of trust. The result of the wise decision was spiritual fruit, as Luke points out, "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem…"[51] For today's multinational ministries, Acts 6 offers guidance. Cultural tensions can be rooted in language, educational levels, ethnicity, or social status, but they cannot be addressed by superficial gestures. They need leadership that listens, empathizes, thinks theologically, and makes courageous and wise decisions. One important point of application is the intentional formation of diverse leadership teams where underrepresented but reputable and wise voices are not only heard but also empowered to make real decisions. The apostles did not tighten their grip on authority. They shared the responsibility. Often, leaders who find themselves in conflict will cling to control. Acts 6 presents a better model of leadership through healthy

[51] Acts 6:7.

and trustworthy delegation. Trust is cultivated and sometimes restored when team members are invited to participate in the meaningful work of restoration. For multinational ministries that are navigating complex cultural moments, the apostles' approach provides a wise model of culturally competent trust building.

Being an Advocate: Acts 9:26–31

Following his conversion, Saul's attempted entrance into the Christian community is one of the most relationally significant moments in the Book of Acts. Luke writes, "And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles…"[52] This moment reveals how personal history can create hesitation among one's community. It also shows how trust, when lost or damaged, does not quickly return.

Saul found himself in isolation. F.F. Bruce explains that "When Saul returned to Jerusalem, he was in a difficult position. His old associates knew all about his defection, and he could expect no friendly welcome from them. On the other hand, the disciples of Jesus…had not forgotten his campaign of persecution."[53] Simon J. Kistemaker adds that, "Paul stands alone between two religious bodies, Judaism and Christianity, for neither accepts him."[54] His past had become a ministry roadblock. Despite his authentic encounter with Jesus, the believers in Jerusalem were skeptical, but their trepidation did

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[52] Acts 9:26-27.

[53] Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 193.

[54] Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 351.

not concern theological differences. It was personal and rooted in Saul's harmful actions against the Christian community. His transformation seemed too extreme to be trusted. They felt a tension between welcoming this outsider and protecting their community. This same tension is one that continues to affect ministries today.

Barnabas enters the scene with spiritual clarity and relational courage. He did not remain a neutral observer of the situation. Instead, he accepted Paul and became his advocate. Holladay notes that Barnabas's "credentials as a generous member of the Jerusalem church and a 'son of encouragement' (Acts 4:36) establish his credibility as an intermediary between Saul and the apostles."[55] Kistemaker writes, "Barnabas lives up to his name when he takes an interest in Paul. He understands Paul's need for acceptance by the Christian church and therefore reaches out to Paul. Barnabas believes the account of Paul's conversion and is convinced of its authenticity…He functions as Paul's spokesman…Barnabas's record of trustworthiness causes the apostles to listen."[56] Barnabas did more than speak about Paul from a distance. He brought him in front of the apostles and affirmed what had occurred in Damascus. By being an advocate of Paul, Barnabas served as a relationship bridge that gave the Apostles confidence. F.F. Bruce notes, "It was Barnabas who, true to his name, acted as Saul's sponsor and encouraged them to receive him."[57]

This act of advocacy demonstrates that trust is not automatically established and cannot always be assumed. At times, it must be cultivated through those who are already

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[55] Holladay, *Acts*, 201.

[56] Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts*, 352.

[57] Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 193.

trusted. In ministry, especially within multicultural contexts, leaders like Barnabas are essential. They see what others miss, and they use their credibility to help misunderstood people find their place. Multinational ministries often include individuals who are new, culturally different, known for a past sin, or troubled by past affiliations. While these individuals might not be distrusted because of known personal misconduct, like that of Paul, distrust might surface because of another suspicion of wrongdoing or affiliation. In such moments, trust does not grow on its own but is cultivated through relational investment. In multinational ministries, unfamiliarity naturally exists. Therefore, Barnabas serves as a good example for team members to embrace the misunderstood and affirm the gifts they see in others. This approach requires team members to invest time in people who might be navigating difficult transitions and to use their influence to lift others into participation.

The type of advocacy demonstrated by Barnabas reflects the Gospel itself. Christ is our advocate before the Father (1 John 2:1). He affirms our place in God's family even though we are undeserving. When leaders on a team advocate for others, they embody the grace that first welcomed them. Acts 9:26–31 shows that Paul's welcome came through a person who was willing to be his advocate. Barnabas' trusted voice opened the door for Kingdom work. In contemporary multinational ministries, advocacy and acceptance are essential to cultivating trust. When leaders understand and embrace this important principle, they reflect the wisdom of Barnabas and the heart of Christ.

Cultural Sensitivity and Decision-making: Acts 15:1–35

The account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1–35 presents one of the earliest examples of the church navigating theological and cultural diversity. As Gentiles were

increasingly responding to the Gospel, the early leaders were faced with an important question of whether they would require the Gentile believers to adopt Jewish customs. Circumcision was the central issue. Did these new Gentile believers need to be circumcised to fully belong in the covenant community? Holladay notes that the position of some within the Jerusalem community was unequivocal because "circumcision and torah observance are required for gentiles." This theological stance closely parallels the viewpoint reflected in Paul's opponents in Galatia.[58] This was no minor disagreement. Since the council addressed a serious doctrinal position deeply rooted in Jewish covenant identity, Luke reports that "The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter…For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements…"[59] The discussion was more than a theological debate - it was a moment that demanded cultural awareness, wisdom, and spiritual maturity. The apostles and elders made space for both testimony and conversation. Paul and Barnabas shared stories of God's work among the Gentiles. Peter offered theological clarity rooted in his own transformation by comparing this obligation to a "yoke." As Holladay indicates, "'Yoke,' a common Jewish metaphor to express obligation, especially one that becomes a burden, is used by Paul to symbolize the 'slavery' that he insists is an intrinsic consequence of absolute submission to the law."[60] Peter's argument is not merely pragmatic. Instead, it is theological by implying that the imposition of the Torah observance being placed on the Gentiles would contradict the grace through which both

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[58] Holladay, *Acts*, 294–95.

[59] Acts 15: 6, 28.

[60] Holladay, *Acts*, 298.

Jews and Gentiles are saved. The council listened well and sought unity that was grounded in shared faith.

The decision to place only minimal requirements on Gentile believers was theological and also culturally sensitive. It affirmed that salvation comes through grace alone and not the law. The act of circumcision, which was long considered a non-negotiable sign of covenant belonging, was no longer to be required. As New Testament scholar and professor at Asbury Theological Seminary Craig S. Keener notes, "To welcome God-fearers without circumcision was to affirm Gentile interest in Judaism…this welcome did not, however, make them members of the covenant for which Israel had long suffered."[61] The council recognized what was at stake for many Jewish believers. Regarding the practical tension that remained, F.F. Bruce notes that "In most cities, Gentile believers had to live alongside Jewish believers, who had been brought up to observe the Levitical food restrictions and to avoid contact with Gentiles as far as possible."[62] Rather than dismiss Jewish sensibilities or simply impose cultural conformity, the apostles chose another path and demonstrated cultural sensitivity. They asked the Gentile believers to abstain from certain practices, which would not be seen as conditions of salvation but as gestures of mutual respect. As Bruce continues, "It is natural that, when the stumbling block of circumcision had been removed, an effort should have been made to provide a practical *modus vivendi* for two groups of people

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[61] Keener, Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2012), 3.

[62] Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 295.

drawn from such different ways of life."[63] The council's response balanced freedom with responsibility, which allowed trust to grow across the cultural divides.

The posture of the council is what made this moment noteworthy. Instead of imposing a top-down policy, they practiced Spirit-led discernment that was grounded in Scripture, testimony, and lived experience. Their final decision was communicated in a letter and delivered by trusted leaders. This act brought clarity and comfort to Gentile believers and affirmed the Holy Spirit's work in them. When the letter was read, "they rejoiced because of its encouragement."[64]

For multinational ministries today, these dynamics remain important. Cultural traditions shape how people understand discipleship and community. Those traditions can break fellowship if left unexamined. However, when leaders create space for dialogue and commit to Gospel essentials, trust grows. Acts 15 illustrates that building trust requires more than tough decision-making. It requires a posture of listening, humility, and courage to make even unpopular decisions. The apostles did not equate faithfulness with cultural sameness. Instead, they trusted the Holy Spirit, even among the cultural differences, to unify a church through grace. The Jerusalem Council reminds ministry leaders that decisions are more than boardroom procedure. They are formative in the way that they shape how people experience the Gospel. When these wise decisions are made, the diverse, global trust becomes a trustworthy place.

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[63] Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 295.

[64] Acts 15:31.

The Legacy of Servant Leadership: Acts 20:17–38

One of the most instructive leadership moments in the New Testament is Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17–38. Holladay notes that the Miletus speech is unique among the speeches in Acts because it is addressed Christian leaders rather than unbelievers. It also differs in tone and content from Paul's other public addresses, as it is "tenderly reminiscent and reassuring but also cautious and even pessimistic in outlook." This address reflects pastoral concern for the future of the church, unlike the missionary sermons delivered to Jews or Gentiles. The speech should also be understood as the "grand trilogy" of sermons presented by Paul in the Book of Acts. The three sermons include the synagogue sermon in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13), the Areopagus address in Athens (Acts 17), and this pastoral charge to Christian leaders.[65] The first is directed to Jews and is noticeable by its Old Testament teachings. The second addresses Gentiles and engages Greco-Roman philosophy. The third is addressed to Christian shepherds and concludes with a quotation from Jesus that focuses on the character and responsibility of leadership. As Paul speaks to these trusted elders, he reflects on his own ministry and calls them to continue the work that he began among them. He reminds them that he served with humility, endured trials, and boldly proclaimed the Gospel.

Paul's reference to "serving the Lord in all humility"[66] is foundational to his understanding of faithful leadership. Humility was the posture through which authority was exercised. Through this posture, trust was cultivated. Even during suffering and

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[65] Holladay, *Acts*, 394.

[66] Acts 20:19.

opposition, Paul's humble posture framed his pastoral responsibilities. His charge was sobering when he wrote to the elders, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."[67] This charge reminded the elders that caring for God's people is tied to a weight of responsibility. Taking on such a heavy responsibility would require a posture of humility. Paul's model of leadership did not rely on his authoritative, apostolic position. It was marked by humble, faithful presence, and personal sacrifice. He lived among the people, and he taught publicly and privately. He worked with his own hands and refused to be a burden. This humble posture led to trust and credibility.

Late New Testament scholar and longtime professor at the University of Aberdeen, I. Howard Marshall, notes that Paul's backward glance in verses 18–27 reflects a leader who had "performed his work faithfully" and "emphasizes that he has taught the elders fully," placing responsibility now in their hands.[68] Paul also prepares them for what lies ahead. He warns of coming threats and urges them to remain vigilant. "Be alert," he says, because "fierce wolves will come in among you."[69] Marshall highlights that in verses 28–35 Paul transitions to future instruction, urging them to "follow his example of faithful service" and to "give themselves to the service of the church as freely as he had done."[70] This passage is full of leadership competencies that

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[67] Acts 20:28.

[68] Marshall, I. Howard, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVP Academic, 2008), 243.

[69] Acts 20:29, 31.

[70] Marshall, I. Howard, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, 243.

cultivate trust. Paul's speech is full of affection and exhortation, and he draws attention to doctrine and the leader's character. He cites his own example of not coveting wealth and of working hard to support both himself, others, and especially the poor. By doing so, he underscores a wider call to servanthood. Reformation theologian John Calvin, when reflecting on Paul's refusal of financial support, explains that Paul's goal was not self-reliance for its own sake but a desire to avoid placing any stumbling block before the weak.[71] Paul wanted his manner of life to silence false accusations and serve as a model of trustworthiness.

Paul's farewell concludes with prayer. He kneels, and the elders weep as they embrace him. Calvin reflects on the significance of Paul's posture in prayer, noting that while "our interior disposition is certainly the chief thing in prayer," outward expressions like kneeling "help jolt us out of our laziness" and "encourage each other in reverence for God."[72] This example served the elders well as it demonstrated that they are not simply inheriting tasks, but they are also learning to minister the Gospel. The affections of this prayer reflect a leadership style that was marked by humility rather than control. Paul's simple yet profound act of kneeling in prayer, and then entrusting the future of the church to God, reveals that he was not clinging tightly to authority. Instead, he was releasing it in trust.

Professor of Religion and History at Claremont McKenna College, Esther Chung, summarizes Paul as "the quintessential model of a faithful teacher," one whose "tireless

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[71] Calvin, John. *Acts*, The Crossway (Crossway, 1995), 213–14.

[72] Calvin, Calvin, *Acts*, 214.

effort to serve believers in the midst of trials" calls others to wholehearted ministry.[73] He did not ask for trust. Instead, he cultivated it through servant leadership. His example speaks to leaders today in multinational contexts marked by differing views about authority and trust. In multinational ministries, leadership is often shaped by a variety of cultural expectations. Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders offers an understanding of trust-building leadership. In some ministry contexts, leadership is associated with organizational flow charts and centralized authority. In others, it emerges through relationships and shared experience. Paul's example does not conform to either extreme. He leads through presence, affection, humility, sacrificial investment, and a care for those weaker than himself. Paul's emphasis on the care for the weak speaks to multicultural ministry teams that find themselves navigating diverse weaknesses. Some team members may carry unique and unseen burdens, such as religious persecution, loneliness, language fatigue, financial hardships, or theological marginalization. Paul's insistence that leaders "help the weak" is a missional reality of holistic discipleship that is necessary for trust to be built.

From helping weaker team members to being physically present, these leadership qualities transcend cultural boundaries. For ministry teams composed of people from different backgrounds, trust must be cultivated, and such development may take a sufficient amount of time. Leaders who follow Paul's example with the Ephesian elders understand that this type of trust cannot be manufactured. It must be built slowly over shared meals, honest conversations, Gospel-centered teaching, authentic prayer, and

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[73] Chung Kim, and Todd R. Hains, *Acts: New Testament Vol. 6*, (IVP Academic, 2013), 292.

moments of mutual sacrifice. In addition, Paul's willingness to release his leadership role by entrusting the elders to God serves as a model for empowering leadership.

Today, leadership is often defined by productivity or successful KPIs. Paul's farewell challenges today's team members, especially those in multinational settings, to do something more significant. It encourages leaders to a life of presence and shared sacrifice. It pushes leaders to commit to the slow work of building trust through humble service. This kind of leadership leaves behind people who are equipped to carry the mission forward.

Conclusion

Trust is not a leadership tactic or a passive competency. In Scripture, trust begins with the reliability of God himself. He is the faithful covenant keeper who binds himself to his people in steadfast love. Since sin introduced suspicion toward God, everything about the world was then fractured, including relationships among people. This relational distrust occurs in families, communities, churches, and organizations. The Gospel responds to this separation with a tangible act from God to restore broken trust. Through Christ's incarnation, obedient humility, death, and resurrection, God proves himself trustworthy by establishing a new covenant community that is shaped by grace.

The Book of Acts provides the story of the early church, which was experiencing the fruit of Christ's work. This fruit becomes visible in a community formed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit creates the conditions where trust becomes possible. He shapes a covenant community whose life together reflects the presence and character of the Triune God. Through Spirit-led community and experiences, the early

church learned to trust God and one another. As they grew, trust was not presumed but rather cultivated under the Holy Spirit's power.

In multinational ministry contexts today, differences are expected. Therefore, the cultivation of trust remains a crucial leadership capacity. Cultural, linguistic, and theological differences are considered as mere challenges. Within a Christian worldview, such differences are occasions for the Holy Spirit to display his ability to unify. The Book of Acts does not ignore the tensions found within diversity. Instead, it demonstrates how the Spirit enables the church to enter those tensions with humility and a shared commitment to one another. Instead of trust being presented as a programmatic goal, Luke demonstrates it as the fruit of communities that are formed, governed, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This theological understanding offers an encouragement and a challenge to multinational teams. Luke's narrative affirms that trust is possible to cultivate even when profound differences are present. This trust occurs when the Holy Spirit forms the community around Christ and covenant faithfulness. At the same time, the Book of Acts offers a challenge to team members to recognize that trust requires time, intentionality, a humble posture, and submission to the Spirit's work. Trust cannot be rushed or forced. Rather, it must be nurtured through consistent practices that reflect God's character. These practices include shared worship, prayer, hospitality, honest communication, wise conflict resolution, and the empowerment of local leaders through contextualized structures. Ministries shaped by trust-building practices like these do more than function effectively. They become visible signs of God's reconciling work in a fractured world.

Finally, the patterns of trust found in the Book of Acts show that trust is shaped through wise decisions, shared experiences and practices, and structures that sustain a community over time. The literature on organizational trust extends these insights by examining how leaders of organizations cultivate or erode trust within contemporary teams.

Organizational Trust

Organizational trust serves as the foundation on which all effective collaboration is built. Stephen M. R. Covey asserts that "Every functioning society, organization, and family functions only inasmuch as there is trust. Indeed, trust makes our world go round."[74] In organizational life, trust functions as a structural necessity and an ethical principle. It guides how systems are formed, how processes are created and implemented, and how relationships are developed. Organizational trust is not a distant characteristic but the necessary ingredient that aligns people with the organization's purposes. Organizational trust is developed through the design of a ministry's structures, the consistency of its systems, and the quality of its relationships. The following sections examine these three dimensions by showing how trustworthy structures, systems, and relationships work together to sustain organizational life.

[74] Stephen M. R. Covey, *Trust and Inspire: How Truly Great Leaders Unleash Greatness in Others* (Simon & Schuster, 2022), 128.

Trustworthy Structures

Structures that cultivate trust are the bedrock of any trustworthy organization. These structures include formal systems, shared norms, and organizational patterns. They shape how individuals interact, make decisions, and respond to challenges. As Roy Lewicki, Mark Saunders, Denise Skinner, Graham Dietz, and Nicole Gillespie of the Cambridge Companions to Management observe, "Trust exists on both the interpersonal and the institutional level, but organizational-level trust emerges as a result of the micro-level interactions of individual actors."[75] Structure, therefore, provides the framework for interpersonal interactions, which in turn foster the growth of trust. The "Companions" analysis of organizational culture highlights this point, noting that culture "acts as a moderating variable on the culturally preferred trust mechanisms," influencing everything about the organization, including its philosophy and identity.[76] Organizational structure functions as the builder of credibility, and it establishes stability within the complexities of a diverse team.

Effective organizational structures help align actions with a shared purpose. Well-known business researcher Jim Collins writes that "attaining alignment is not just a process of adding new things; it is also a never-ending process of identifying and doggedly correcting misalignments that push a company away from its core ideology or impede progress."[77] Alignment becomes an ongoing discipline of stewardship that

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[75] Saunders, Mark Saunders et al., eds., *Organizational Trust: A Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 285.

[76] Saunders et al., *Organizational Trust*, 302.

[77] James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (Harper Business, 2009), 215.

ensures that systems and decisions are strongly attached to the organization's mission. In this sense, alignment keeps the organization faithful to its purpose and safeguards it from confusing activity. Famous businessman Peter Drucker captured a similar idea when he distinguished between efficiency and effectiveness: "Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right thing."[78] Healthy structures help leaders pursue effectiveness by keeping the organization focused on its mission-driven priorities. Together, these perspectives show that trustworthy structures depend on both technical competence and the "right thing." Therefore, structural alignment becomes a visible expression of an organization's core values, and these values serve as a foundation for trust.

Trustworthy structures provide both freedom and constraint. Collins observes that "good-to-great companies built a consistent system with clear constraints, but they also gave people the freedom and responsibility within the framework of that system. They hired self-disciplined people who didn't need to be managed, and then managed the system, not the people."[79] Structures that define boundaries, and at the same time empower individual creativity, help cultivate an environment of respect and accountability. Entrepreneur and creator of the Entrepreneurial Operating System, Gino Wickman, similarly emphasizes that leaders "need to structure [their] organization correctly" by reducing complexity and creating accountability[80] so that people can work

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[78] Peter F. Drucker, *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done* (Harper Business, 2017).

[79] James C. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't* (Harper Business, 2009), 125.

[80] Gino Wickman, *Traction: Get a Grip on Your Business* (BenBella Books, 2011), 22.

according to their strengths. When structure fosters freedom within clear boundaries, it communicates trust in the team.

Trustworthy structures are also marked by adaptability. They account for the complexities and uncertainties of real-world contexts. This practice entails developing the competencies to assess, learn, adjust, and respond well. Retired U.S. Army general and leadership strategist Stanley McChrystal highlights this aspect in his book *Team of Teams*, in which he contends that "adaptability, not efficiency, must become our central competency."[81] His framework distinguishes between complicated and complex systems, and he argues that organizations must be built for responsiveness. McChrystal states, "By embracing humility—recognizing the inevitability of surprises and unknowns—and concentrating on systems that can survive and indeed benefit from such surprises, we can triumph over volatility."[82] Structures designed with humility at their core allow organizations and their teams to acknowledge that not all outcomes can be controlled. Nonetheless, systems remain trustworthy when they display adaptability, are built on humility, and are designed for transparency and collaboration. The type of humility that cultivates transparency and collaboration within a structure also promotes interdependence. Trustworthy structures recognize that interdependence is not a weakness. Instead, it is a defining feature of organizational health.

Patrick Lencioni echoes this reality in his model of team dynamics, describing trust as "the foundation" for all other behaviors that make a team functional and the

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[81] Stanley A. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2015), 20.

[82] McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 80.

essential base of his organizational pyramid.[83] For Lencioni, healthy structure and relational trust are inseparable. The healthy structure creates the context so that trust can flourish. Organizational cultural theorists Edgar and Peter Schein add that such trust-based structures are vital in an era of cultural diversity, where "keeping pace in this world will require teamwork and collaboration of all sorts based on the higher levels of trust and openness created by more personalized relationships."[84]

Structures that are aligned with integrity and openness promote clarity and adaptability. The Cambridge Companions note that in global contexts, trust processes are shaped by culture, yet organizational culture itself can either inhibit or promote trust across boundaries.[85] Therefore, trustworthy structures must be flexible in order to adapt. They must also be grounded enough to provide stability. This understanding reflects what Collins described as "clear constraints" that allow self-disciplined people to thrive. It also echoes what McChrystal envisioned as systems designed for humility and resilience. In this way, trustworthy structures combine alignment and adaptability. These create organizational systems that remain faithful to the mission while cultivating the transparency and collaboration necessary for enduring trust.

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[83] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 37.

[84] Edgar H. Schein and Peter Schein, *Humble Leadership: The Power of Relationships, Openness, and Trust* (Berrett-Koehler, 2018), 5.

[85] Saunders et al., *Organizational Trust*, 302.

Trustworthy Processes

Trustworthy structures provide stability for an organization. Trustworthy processes give that organization life. Processes are how people communicate, make decisions, and respond to challenges, including failures. These processes will determine whether or not structures remain stagnant or become instruments of growth. Stephen M. R. Covey defines trust as "a function of two things: character and competence…"[86] Both of these must be enacted through consistent behaviors. Therefore, trust is not an abstract feature but a pattern of reliability that is reinforced when "keeping commitments" becomes "the number one influencing behavior" within relationships.[87] Karen Hough, the founder of ImprovEdge, similarly proposes that "we build trust over time, through consistency and behaviors that continually show we are collaborative, innovative, and trustworthy."[88] This kind of repetition builds credibility where leaders and organizations earn confidence through faithfulness and not simply by marketing slogans or team-building exercises.

Trustworthy processes also depend on how organizations communicate. The Chartered Management Institute notes that "trust is not automatically present in a working relationship. It needs to be developed and nurtured over a period of time," which requires patience and careful communication. Sharing information openly, they continue, "helps your team feel that they are included and have the knowledge necessary to fulfil their duties," which reduces the vulnerability that comes when people are "kept in the

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[86] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust*, 29–30.

[87] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust*, 223.

[88] Karen Hough, *The Improvisation Edge: Secrets to Building Trust and Radical Collaboration at Work*, A BK Business Book (Berrrett-Koehler Publishers, 2011), 3.

dark."[89] When communication is honest and well-timed, employees perceive that the leadership is dependable. This notion is true even in uncertain moments. Leadership consultant and author Ciara Ungar identifies that "Being open and transparent, communicating the vision, defining roles, rewarding and encouraging consistency are just a few ways you can affect culture that directly contribute to trust-building."[90] These perspectives align with leadership expert Ken Blanchard and his colleagues, who suggest that "even bad news is good when shared because it opens up a dialogue that can lead to problem solving and enhanced trust between leaders and team members."[91] Therefore, communication is a practical tool that cultivates trust. Moreover, it is rooted in a deeper principle because good communication honors the dignity of those in the conversation.

Adaptive processes that integrate feedback and correction also strengthen trust. Amy Edmondson, a Harvard Business School professor who specializes in team learning, emphasizes that success is often the result of "quickly catch[ing] the error, correct[ing] it, and prevent[ing] real harm,"[92] rather than avoiding mistakes altogether. Her work with Susan Reynolds extends this principle to collaborative environments, where "building an adaptive shared vision provides a foundation for collaboration that helps overcome the inevitable conflicts and misunderstandings that arise in cross-disciplinary work."[93]

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[89] Chartered Management Institute, *Managing Others: Teams and Individuals* (Profile Books, 2013), 47–48.

[90] Ciara Ungar, *Leadership Lessons From a Team Captain: The Guide to Leading Teams with Trust, Transparency and Empathy* (Morgan James Publishing, 2022), 54.

[91] Kenneth H. Blanchard et al., *Go Team! Take Your Team to the Next Level* (Berrett-Koehler, 2007), 66.

[92] Amy C. Edmondson and Jim Euchner, "Failing Well: A Conversation with Amy Edmondson," *Research Technology Management* 67, no. 2 (2024): 13. https://doi.org/10.1080/08956308.2024.2298634.

[93] Amy Edmondson and Susan Salter Reynolds, *Building the Future: Big Teaming for Audacious Innovation* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016), 98.

Similarly, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, who are pioneers in adaptive leadership, observe that leadership capable of "receiving people's anger without becoming personally defensive generates trust"[94] and that type of organizational culture, though often unwritten, "powerfully determines what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior."[95] These insights show that adaptability and feedback are core practices that cultivate trust. Processes that welcome reflection, critique, praise, and even failure demonstrate both humility and confidence. They show that leaders value growth and learning even more than maintaining a perfect image. In environments like these, acts of transparent reflection strengthen the confidence that future challenges can be faced together.

The cultivation of trust also requires empowerment. The Chartered Management Institute notes that "empowerment is a process whereby employees are given greater discretion to make decisions and act on them without referring to their superiors."[96] Empowerment is fostered by leaders trusting the judgment of their teams and allowing mutual accountability to replace control. Ungar reinforces this view by connecting empowerment to motivation: "Assuming the best of your employees and trusting them as mature, responsible contributors to the overall goal and team progress will set a foundation for motivation and trust."[97] Stephen Covey expresses a similar dynamic,

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[94] Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Change* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), 145.

[95] Ronald A. Heifetz et al., *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2009), 57.

[96] Chartered Management Institute, *Managing Others*, 50.

[97] Ungar, *Lessons From A Team Captain*, 37.

observing that "trusting others changes how leaders see others, and being trusted changes the way people respond to leaders."[98] This approach becomes a reciprocal cycle where extending trust promotes the behaviors that make trust possible.

Trustworthy processes are also characterized by resiliency and adaptability in complex environments. McChrystal describes how "team members tackling complex environments must all grasp the team's situation and overarching purpose."[99] At times, perceived inefficiencies, such as deep relational familiarity, are "the foundation for our adaptability." McChrystal's emphasis on "shared consciousness"[100] illustrates that trust grows where processes create visibility and shared purpose. Patrick Lencioni similarly identifies this type of vulnerability as a process that goes beyond one's feelings. Instead, he describes that trust enables people to say "I need help" or "I'm sorry" as a necessity to build a great team.[101] In both of these cases, the authors identify that trustworthy processes become the means through which humility and clarity changes the relationship into real collaboration. These adaptive processes are rarely found in an employment manual, nor, as Bolsinger indicates, in "bull sessions or ropes courses…But only 'meaningful work together' develops the kinds of relationships that will endure into uncharted territories."[102]

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[98] Covey, *Trust and Inspire*, 140.

[99] McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 99.

[100] McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 187.

[101] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 27.

[102] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 68.

Finally, trustworthy processes are sustained by the rhythms of risk and grace. American church historian Martin E. Marty insists that "no one can speak intelligently about trust without dealing with its inevitable accompanying theme: risk"[103] and warns that "over-protectiveness has its price in matters of trusting or not trusting."[104] Stephen Covey echoes this tension, acknowledging that "there is risk in trusting people" but adds that "not trusting is often the greater risk."[105] Therefore, trust requires courage to act before acquiring full certainty about a situation. This posture requires exhibiting grace toward others, which reflects what Covey calls the "speed of trust…," in which openness accelerates collaboration while fear and suspicion slow it down. Hough captures the same idea in practical terms: "When trust is low, people experience stress, which seriously affects our health, mental capabilities, and emotional stability."[106]

Processes that are steeped in grace quell anxiety with a real sense of confidence that enables trust to grow. The patterns established through trustworthy processes shape how individuals relate to one another. However, as important as these processes are to an organization, trust is ultimately most visible in relationships.

Trustworthy Relationships

The structures of an organization provide a stable framework, and processes give them life. The relationships of an organization give them their soul, and therefore, need to

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[103] Martin E. Marty, *Building Cultures of Trust*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 17.

[104] Marty, *Building Cultures of Trust*, 155.

[105] Covey, *Trust and Inspire*, 133.

[106] Hough, *The Improvisation Edge*, 4.

be healthy. The quality of interpersonal relationships determines whether structures and systems produce genuine trust. Leadership thinker and author Simon Sinek argues that "to earn the trust of people, the leaders of an organization must first treat them like people. To earn trust, he must extend trust."[107] In other words, trust must be is relational before it can become procedural. It begins with the leader's temperament toward others, and then it can expand outward through mutual care. "True trust can only exist among people," Sinek continues, "and we can only trust others when we know they are actively and consciously concerned about us."[108] Therefore, the foundation of every organization lies in how individuals are treated within its community.

Relational trust requires humility as its core capacity. Leadership researchers Fangmei Lu and Zhi Li note that "as team members become accustomed to regarding humble behaviors as normal and valued, it becomes easier for them to reflect effectively on team functioning and carry out changes."[109] Humility creates an environment where feedback can be given without fear, and this same environment allows authority to be exercised without becoming harsh dominance. This kind of humility also yields vulnerability. Patrick Lencioni identifies that vulnerability is the heart of cohesive teams and that trust emerges "when members get to a point where they are completely comfortable being transparent, honest, and naked with one another."[110] Such vulnerability

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[107] Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2014), 13.

[108] Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last*, 92.

[109] Fangmei Lu and Zhi Li, "Do Humble Leaders Build More Flexible Teams?," *Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal* 52, no. 7 (2024): 3. https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.13364.

[110] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 27.

transforms positional hierarchy into relational unity. Stephen Covey extends this perspective by emphasizing that "nothing is as fulfilling as a relationship of trust"[111] and that "what you do has far greater impact than anything you say."[112] Together, these insights reveal that credibility in leadership is more than having a position of authority - rather, it is primarily a matter of humble authenticity. Trustworthy relationships characterized by humility are sustained through open dialogue and emotional safety. Authors and conflict management experts, Craig Runde and Tim Flanagan, emphasize that "team members' willingness to express thoughts, emotions, and interests is directly related to the trust level among the members."[113] When emotions are concealed, "others are likely to pick up on subtle cues that signal some discomfort or uneasiness…and trust begins to erode."[114] Likewise, "teams that create a climate of trust and safety have a much better chance of dealing frankly with differences and disagreements" than those without such an environment.[115] Edgar and Peter Schein reinforce this relational dynamic by noting that "leadership occurs in groups and hinges on open and trusting relationships within those groups."[116]

A modern-day challenge to trustworthy communication, especially in multinational organizations, is the necessity of telecommunications. Schein and Shein

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[111] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust*, 26.

[112] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust*, 132.

[113] Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader: How You and Your Organization Can Manage Conflict Effectively*, 2nd ed. (Jossey-Bass, 2013), 237.

[114] Runde and Flanagan, *Conflict Competent Leader*, 149.

[115] Runde and Flanagan, *Conflict Competent Leader*, 226.

[116] Schein and Schein, *Humble Leadership*, X.

caution that although technological communication is efficient, it cannot substitute personal presence. They argue that "one thing we believe telepresence will not augment is the initial establishment of trust and openness." Genuine connection still depends on "personal connections," bonding in the "off moments," and informal conversations.[117] Kouzes and Posner contribute to these ideas about virtual communication by noting "There are limits to virtual trust. Firsthand experience with another human being is just a more reliable way of creating identification, increasing adaptability, and reducing misunderstandings."[118]

Vulnerability remains a defining element in these relationships. As a defense researcher at the University of Southampton, Neville Stanton captures this reality by indicating that "Vulnerability involves the possibility for the trusted party to take advantage of the trustor. If there is not vulnerability, then there is no need for trust."[119] The act of being vulnerable by trusting inherently contains risk, yet this risk gives trust its relational power. Martin E. Marty links this same tension to a community by noting that "trust and trustworthiness are most often expressions not of isolated individuals but of the community…the fate of trust-relations depends in no small measure on the health of that community."[120] Trustworthiness, therefore, is not only an individual virtue but the byproduct of a community's shared values. As Sinek describes, "the more we trust that

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[117] Schein and Schein, *Humble Leadership*, 113.

[118] Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 215.

[119] Neville Stanton, ed., *Trust in Military Teams*, Human Factors in Defence (Ashgate, 2011), 128.

[120] Marty, *Building Cultures of Trust*, 53–54.

the people to the left of us and the people to the right of us have our backs, the better equipped we are to face the constant threats from the outside together."[121]

The strength of trust depends largely on consistency. Karen Hough highlights that reliable consistency gives the organization the confidence needed to thrive "when there is trust in the adherence to goals and values…"[122] Stephen Covey similarly notes that this sort of credibility arises where "character and competence" meet in consistent action. When words and behavior align, consistency becomes more prominent than uncertainty. In organizational life, consistency becomes the evidence of trustworthiness, the people making up an organization are confident that the promises made are the promises kept.

Trustworthy relationships embody humility, open dialogue, vulnerability, and consistency. These practices reflect a posture of mutual respect and shared responsibility where leaders and teams depend on one another. When these relationships function in a healthy manner that demonstrates these qualities, organizations cultivate the relational atmosphere of trust needed where the people can flourish.

Conclusion

The literature on organizational trust affirms that trustworthy structures, processes, and relationships create an environment where reliability and care are part of the daily life of an organization. Patrick Lencioni describes this dynamic as a culture of "vulnerability-based trust,"[123] where honesty, humility, and reliance on one anther shape

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[121] Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last*, 27.

[122] Hough, *The Improvisation Edge*, 5.

[123] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 27.

how teams function. However, trust does not develop in isolation. In organizations, particularly in multinational ministries, trust is also shaped by the cultural frameworks that influence communication, authority, and community expectations. As the Cambridge Companions observe, globalization has created new and increasing opportunities for "close interaction and cooperation with people who come from a national-societal cultural background different from one's own."[124] Therefore, understanding these cultural dynamics is necessary to cultivate trust among diverse team members. Therefore, developing cultural competence is an important dimension of trustworthy leadership.

Cross-Cultural Competencies

Cultural experts emphasize that multinational work requires cross-cultural competencies that help team members interpret and respond well to cultural differences. More than technical skills, such competencies include awareness, adaptability, relational insight, and other abilities that support trust and cooperation across diverse settings. Researchers in intercultural leadership, organizational behavior, multinational ministry, and global management note the importance of these competencies. When leaders understand the cultural differences of their team and navigate them wisely, they cultivate long-term trust.

Cross-Cultural Awareness

Development of cultural awareness is identified as the starting point for effective cross-cultural engagement. Plueddemann explains that "being aware of cultural

[124] Saunders et al., *Organizational Trust*, 42.

differences is a valuable first step for the leader working between two cultures."[125] Awareness is the foundation for interpreting actions and communication that might otherwise be misunderstood. However, Plueddemann cautions that awareness alone is insufficient - knowledge must be combined with sincere engagement. He argues that "It is not enough to have knowledge of cultural differences or to be experts in the mysteries of leadership techniques."[126] Effective cross-cultural work calls for the ability to apply awareness through conduct that will foster understanding and respect.

Global expert of cross-cultural communication, Erin Meyer, reinforces the necessity of awareness by identifying how unexamined cultural assumptions can hinder collaboration. She observes that "the vast majority of managers who conduct business internationally have little understanding about how culture is impacting their work."[127] This lack of awareness often results in misalignment regarding communication and decision-making. As multinational team members interact, they naturally bring assumptions about what creates healthy communication and decision-making. Without cultural awareness, these assumptions can lead to confusion or bring an offense that could damage trust.

Global and cultural scholars, Simon Dolan and Kristine Kawamura, extend this thought in *Cross Cultural Competence* by describing awareness as an ongoing process. They note that "developing cultural awareness on the journey to achieving cultural

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[125] Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures*, 199.

[126] Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures*, 215.

[127] Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map: Breaking through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business* (PublicAffairs, 2014), 10.

competence doesn't happen overnight."[128] Building such awareness requires curiosity and humility rather than forming a simple checklist of cultural factoids. The commitment to this type of awareness helps multinational team members move beyond making quick judgments to gain in-depth understanding.

Cross-Cultural Communication and Adaptability

Cultural context informs and shapes how individuals communicate and interpret meaning. Meyer's distinction between low- and high-context communication provides an important framework for understanding cultural differences. In low-context cultures, communication is direct and focused on precision, and "effective communication must be simple, clear, and explicit."[129] Alternatively, high-context cultures rely on shared understanding and subtle cues, where "good communication is sophisticated, nuanced, and layered."[130] These differing expectations create friction when team members interpret one another's styles through their own cultural lens. For example, low-context communicators may view indirect communication as secretive, while high-context communicators may perceive directness as condescending or patronizing.[131] Recognizing and adapting to these contextual norms allows team members to interpret meaning accurately, and this ability is an essential part of cross-cultural competence. Moreover, this ability helps team members to tailor their own communication for clarity and respect.

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[128] Simon L. Dolan and Kristine Marin Kawamura, eds., *Cross Cultural Competence: A Field Guide for Developing Global Leaders and Managers* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2015), 17.

[129] Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 34.

[130] Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 39.

[131] Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 42.

Adapting one's communication means learning to operate within various contexts with flexibility, rather than forsaking one's natural style. This skill is critical for multinational teams where trust oftentimes depends on showing respect during interactions.

Meyer also links communication style to decision-making and scheduling as cultural expectations vary widely in these two areas. In some cultures, decisions occur through consensus, which emphasizes group harmony and stability. In others, decisions are made rapidly by individuals in authority, allowing for later revision if necessary.[132] Misalignment in these approaches can produce frustration or a feeling of unreliability. Similarly, having different views of time management affects "a remarkable number of aspects of daily life."[133] Therefore, cross-cultural competence includes the capacity to navigate these differences without assigning moral value to one approach over the other. Adaptability in communication, decision-making, and scheduling cultivates mutual respect and contributes to the growth of trust among team members.

Cross-Cultural Trust Formation

Several authors note that trust is experienced and built differently across cultures. Meyer distinguishes between "cognitive trust," based on reliability and competence, and "affective trust," grounded in personal connection and emotional closeness.[134] She adds that "task-based" cultures develop trust through consistent performance and dependability, while "relationship-based" cultures form trust through shared experiences

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[132] Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 149.

[133] Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 228.

[134] Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 168.

and interpersonal familiarity.[135] The implications for multinational teams are significant. Team members must discern whether trust arises from the completion of work or from the cultivation of relationships. Misunderstanding this distinction can result in unintentional offenses that cause distrust. Meyer advises that "a little time invested in building a personal connection can go a very long way toward establishing trust."[136] This statement underscores the relational nature of global work. In contexts that give more weight to "affective trust," activities such as informal conversations, meals, or shared experiences can build the necessary foundation for effective teamwork. The opposite of that is true in "tasked based" environments. Meeting deadlines, fulfilling commitments, and demonstrating technical competence are some of the pathways to credibility. Cross-cultural competence allows team members to identify which mode of trust is expected and to respond accordingly. This practice will ensure that their behavior shows reliability and respect within that framework.

Anthropologist and former provost at Fuller Seminary, Sherwood Lingenfelter, offers a similar perspective by describing how "the complexity of leading cross-culturally lies in the challenge of building a community of trust among people who come from two or more cultural traditions that provoke a clash of worldviews."[137] He argues that working together is fragile without addressing different values related to time, authority structures, or production and progress. In this context, trust becomes the product of compromise where participants accept differences rather than reject them. This process

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[135] Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 171.

[136] Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 209.

[137] Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership* (Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 20.

requires patience and clear communication, which are two competencies at the heart of cross-cultural effectiveness.

Cross-Cultural Empathy

The need for empathy and active listening is a recurring theme in the literature. In *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, Mary Lederleitner, scholar and consultant on global mission partnerships, emphasizes that genuine partnership depends on the ability to listen deeply and to understand others' beliefs within their cultural framework. She notes, "We need to not only deeply grasp how our partners feel and what they believe but also take the additional step to understand why such feelings and beliefs are wholly logical within a given context."[138] Therefore, embodying empathy is a needed competence that functions as a remedy for interpreting others only through their personal background. By shifting the focus from judgment to understanding, multinational team members can interpret behavior as contextually meaningful rather than threatening.

Lederleitner also critiques paternalism, which is a pattern where individuals from dominant cultures assume they have superior knowledge or capability. She writes that "the person coming from the more affluent or developed country assumes he or she knows what is best."[139] These assumptions undermine trust by reinforcing hierarchy rather than partnership. Paternalistic thinking prevents genuine collaboration because it "causes people to not let go of control…there is no margin for people to develop, make

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[138] Mary T. Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships: Navigating the Complexities of Money and Mission* (InterVarsity Press, 2010), 24.

[139] Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, 51.

mistakes, and learn."[140] Empathy and shared accountability serve as remedies to this dynamic. When team members approach one another as serious contributors with valuable perspectives, trust and respect can develop more naturally.

Lederleitner further notes that cultural misunderstandings exists even among experienced cross-cultural workers by stating, "Over time, leaders can gain a false confidence that they know how to work in the 'global context.' However, each place is unique, and how meaning is interpreted varies greatly from place to place."[141] This observation supports the argument made by Dolan and Kawamura that cross-cultural competence is not static, but rather, it is developed through "habits of reflection, self-awareness, openness, and observation in work and life."[142] These habits serve as continual corrections that spur teams to continue learning rather than to assume they have mastered cross-cultural competencies. The development of these habits to truly know a new culture takes time. While major cultural characteristics may be easier to understand, the nuances of a culture are only understood through friendship and humble engagement over a long period of time.

Cross-Cultural Continuous Learning

Dolan and Kawamura emphasize that people are often unaware of how culture shapes their "attitudes, perceptions, personality, and behavior."[143] This lack of awareness

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[140] Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, 51.

[141] Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, 47.

[142] Dolan and Kawamura, *Cross Cultural Competence*, 17.

[143] Dolan and Kawamura, *Cross Cultural Competence*, 17.

can lead to feeling superior or frustrated when differences arise, and it may cause individuals to withdraw from others. Self-awareness helps multinational team members recognize how their cultural background has influenced the way they interpret situations and respond to others. The authors also describe two common traps when considering oneself: cultural inferiority and cultural superiority. While inferiority causes individuals to over-accommodate and lose confidence in their own cultural identity, superiority causes one to devalue others' cultural norms and impose their own as superior.[144] Since either of the two extremes disrupts the cultivation of trust, the better alternative is empathy, "the ability to put oneself in the shoes of others…"[145] This competency encourages respect without erasing distinct perspectives. Therefore, the awareness of one's own cultural lens becomes the foundation for healthy engagement with others.

Such awareness also requires humility, which complements this framework because it keeps individuals open to learning from others. A humble learning posture is essential for leadership. Those who assume they already understand cultural dynamics are the least likely to adapt successfully. Dolan and Kawamura note, "arrogance is the enemy of learning."[146] Humility is not passively gained but actively curious. A humble team member recognizes that cultural learning is continuous and that successful global collaboration depends on an openness to change.

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[144] Dolan and Kawamura, *Cross Cultural Competence*, 137.

[145] Dolan and Kawamura, *Cross Cultural Competence*, 137–38.

[146] Dolan and Kawamura, *Cross Cultural Competence*, 137.

Cross-Cultural Collaboration

Effective cross-cultural competence extends beyond personal awareness and includes practices that sustain trust within diverse teams. In *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, Lingenfelter and Green highlight the need for mutual accountability by noting that "teams in missions are not a space for self-promotion or ladder climbing but an arena in which our togetherness is expressed in concrete acts."[147] Therefore, collaboration across cultures requires visible respect and accountability among all team members. Lingenfelter further warns that conflict often arises when one cultural model of authority dominates the other when he writes, "When culturally diverse people try to work together toward mutual goals, their assumptions about structure and working relationships may create serious issues of conflict and disagreement. Unless people resolve these differences, they cannot work together effectively."[148] This insight highlights the importance of feedback systems that allow disagreement without fearing a break of the relationship. Teams develop stability and transparency when accountability is framed as mutual rather than purely hierarchical. Peter Greer, the current president of HOPE International, adds a similar perspective, noting that "the global church needs each member…We all have something to give, and we all have something to receive."[149] Team members who recognize and value their mutual dependence are less likely to dominate an environment and are more likely to foster one where trust and collaboration can flourish.

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[147] Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Julie A. Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally: Christ-Centered Solutions for Leading Multinational Teams* (Baker Academic, 2022), 82.

[148] Lingenfelter and Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, 20.

[149] Peter Greer, *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches* (Bethany House, 2015), 173.

Conclusion

Across the literature, cross-cultural competence is grounded in awareness, adaptability, humility, empathy, and mutual accountability. These competencies enable multinational team members to interpret behavior within context, manage various forms of communication, and value the differences built into the cultures found throughout the world. Scholars such as Meyer, Lingenfelter, Plueddemann, Lederleitner, Dolan, and Kawamura agree that cultural competence develops through ongoing reflection and interaction rather than simple solutions.

The consistent thread found in these works is that trust depends on understanding how others interact and make decisions. Competence in these areas allows team members to prevent misinterpretation and to create missional alignment. Though the terms of trust differ (cognitive versus affective, task-based versus relationship-based), the fundamental requirement is the same, which is to have the ability to perceive and adapt to what is different. Cross-cultural competence is not simply an organizational talent. It is a vital skill within multinational environments for maintaining effective collaboration. Through a posture of humility and ongoing learning, team members can cultivate the trust that is needed for global organizations.

Summary of the Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this chapter establishes that trust is a theological, interpersonal, and organizational reality that is essential to collaborative work in multinational settings. Theologically, trust begins with God's character. Theologians such as Michael Horton, O. Palmer Robertson, and others have rooted human trust in the

faithfulness and reliability of the covenant-keeping God. This reality forms the basis for human confidence. This theological foundation shapes the biblical narrative in the Book of Acts, where trust is cultivated through shared life, generosity, conflict resolution, advocacy, and leadership that is marked by humility and sacrifice. These narratives show that trust is not assumed or freely given. Rather, it develops through tangible acts, discernment, relational investment, and the work of the Holy Spirit within communities that are navigating complex challenges.

Organizational scholars and leaders reinforce these patterns by describing trust as a function of consistent actions, clear structures, open communication, and adaptive processes. Covey's statement that "what you do has far greater impact than anything you say"[150] underscores the behavioral nature of trust, while McChrystal's work on "shared consciousness" highlights the importance of transparency and mutual understanding for teams facing complex challenges. Lencioni, Runde and Flanagan, and other leadership scholars affirm that trust deepens when teams practice vulnerability and honest dialogue. In these environments, trust allows conflict to be addressed constructively, supports heathy communication and decision-making, and strengthens the alignment that is necessary for teams to effectively function.

The literature on cross-cultural competence adds important insight by showing how cultural frameworks shape expectations around communication, hierarchy, time, and decision-making. Erin Meyer's distinction between low-context and high-context communication provides a lens for understanding misinterpretations that often arise in multinational settings. Lederleitner's examination of paternalism explains how attitudes

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[150] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust*, 132.

of superiority erode trust in cross-cultural partnerships. Dolan and Kawamura emphasize humility, empathy, ongoing learning, and self-awareness as essential competencies for navigating complexities within a multicultural environment.

Across these bodies of literature, several consistent insights emerge. Trust grows when character and competence align, when communication is open rather than guarded, when differences are acknowledged rather than ignored, and when team members demonstrate humility, empathy, and consistency. At the same time, trust also requires vulnerability. As Martin E. Marty observes, trust involves "inevitable"[151] risk. Vulnerability cannot exist without the willingness to extend confidence in another before promises have come to fruition. In multinational teams, cultural differences often increase feelings associated with risk, so practicing competencies such as humility and transparency is vital.

The theological, organizational, and cross-cultural perspectives gleaned from these authors demonstrate that cultivating trust is an ongoing process that shapes how multinational team members pursue and share a mission. The next chapter describes the design of this study and explains the qualitative methodology used to explore how trust is cultivated within multinational ministry teams.

[151] Marty, *Building Cultures of Trust*, 17.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate how team members cultivate trust within their multinational organizations. This research seeks to understand the specific strategies and practices used by leaders in Christian ministry contexts to foster a culture of trust and collaboration among team members. By exploring these dynamics, the study provides insights that can enhance leadership effectiveness and organizational health within Christian ministries.

The principal assumption of this study is that ministry leaders have developed wisdom through their experiences leading multinational teams. These leaders recognize the critical role of trust in effective ministry and have cultivated approaches that nurture it through various means. Their reflections and practices offer valuable examples of how trust can be cultivated and sustained within the complex environments of multinational ministry work.

To address the purpose of this study, the researcher identified three primary areas of focus that guided the design of the research questions and the interpretation of the findings:

1. Cultural Backgrounds and Behaviors

   This focus explores how cultural diversity shapes the dynamics of trust within multinational ministry teams. It examines how differing worldviews, communication styles, and cultural expectations either strengthen or challenge trust among team members.

2. Personal Competencies

   This area investigates the individual qualities and leadership capacities that contribute to building trust across cultural boundaries. Attention is given to traits such as humility, empathy, consistency, and theological discernment as well as the interpersonal skills that enable ministry leaders to navigate complex ministry environments.

3. Intentional Practices

   This focus considers the deliberate actions and rhythms that sustain trust over time within ministry organizations. These relational practices include prayer, shared meals, transparent communication, and accountability systems that reflect an aligned commitment to unity and respect.

Together, these three areas provide a framework for understanding how Christian leaders cultivate trust in diverse, multinational contexts. This chapter describes the research design, participant selection, data collection, and procedures used to explore these themes.

To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. RQ1: How do the cultural backgrounds and behaviors of team members shape trust dynamics in multinational ministry teams?
2. RQ2: What personal competencies are needed from members within a multinational context to cultivate trust?
3. RQ3: What intentional practices do multinational ministry teams use to cultivate and sustain trust across cultural boundaries?

Design of the Study

In *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Sharan B. Merriam, scholar of adult education and qualitative research, notes that a qualitative study is "...motivated by intellectual interest in a phenomenon and has as its goal the extension of knowledge...and its primary purpose is to know more about a phenomenon."[152] The investigators or researchers "are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to the experiences."[153] This study employed a basic qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. Using a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to gather in-depth insights through interviews by exploring how ministry leaders and their teams cultivate trust within their organizations. This approach allowed the researcher to explore key themes, common strategies, challenges, and the experiences that shape how leaders and their teams perceive trust and implement trust practices in their organizational contexts. Rather than relying on a quantitative tool to measure trust, this research focused on understanding the perspectives of the team members as they sought to foster trust through a variety of shared practices. This study also strives to understand how ministry leaders interpret and describe their experiences of cultivating trust. As scholars Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams caution in *The Craft of Research*, "It is risky to attach yourself to what any one researcher says about an issue. It is not 'research' when you

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[152] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (Jossey-Bass, 2009), 3.

[153] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 5.

uncritically summarize another's work…if you rely on at least two sources, you'll almost always find that they do not agree entirely, and that's where your own research can begin."[154] This principle guided the interpretation of the participants' diverse perspectives with balance and discernment.

This study assumes that knowledge and understanding are developed through the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals. As a theological study, it also assumes that trust within Christian leadership is both relational and spiritual. As a spiritual practice, trust is rooted in Scripture, the character of God, and the radical work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the researcher approached this study both as an interpreter of the interviews and as a participant within the faith community being examined.

Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants who could provide in-depth insights into cultivating trust within multinational ministry contexts. The study employed "purposeful sampling" to select individuals with direct experience of the topic under investigation. This sampling is "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned."[155] The researcher selected six participants who serve in executive-level, decision-making roles within their organizations and who have experience in addressing the organizational and relational aspects of trust.

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[154] Wayne C. Booth et al., *The Craft of Research*, 4th ed. (The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 99.

[155] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 77.

The sample was intentionally diverse, including both men and women, younger and older leaders, and representatives from various regions of the world and from denominational backgrounds. The participants also represented a range of ministry contexts, such as education, poverty relief, pastoral leadership, and organizational administration. Such diversity allowed for a broad and balanced perspective on how trust is cultivated in cross-cultural settings and gave depth to the data by offering varied perspectives about the dynamics of trust within multinational ministry teams.

The final study was conducted through personal interviews with the six leaders of the multinational ministries. They were invited to participate by an introductory email, followed by a second email with both a demographic questionnaire and a consent form. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate. In addition, each participant compiled an online demographic questionnaire and signed a "Research Participant Consent Form" to respect and protect their human rights. The Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is "minimal," according to Covenant Theological Seminary's IRB Guidelines. The following is a sample of this consent form.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research conducted by Will Savell to investigate how ministry leaders cultivate trust within their organizations for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

1) The purpose of the research is to investigate *how ministry leaders cultivate and maintain trust within their organizations, focusing on leadership practices, cultural competencies, and spiritual foundations.*
2) Potential benefits of the research may include receiving *insights into effective trust-building strategies that enhance organizational leadership in ministry settings.*

Though no direct benefits for participants, I hope they will be encouraged by the experience of sharing their experiences with an eager listener and learner.

3) The research process will include *approximately 6–10 ministry leaders from various denominations. The research will involve conducting semi-structured interviews that will be audio-recorded for accuracy. Data analysis will focus on identifying themes and patterns related to trust-building practices.*
4) Participants in this research will *be asked to engage in a one-on-one interview lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Participants will share their experiences, insights, and practices related to cultivating trust within their organizations.*
5) Potential discomforts or stresses: Participants may experience minor emotional discomfort when discussing challenges or sensitive topics related to leadership and trust. However, every effort will be made to create a comfortable and supportive environment during interviews.
6) Potential risks: Minimal. According to the Human Rights Risk Level Assessment, the potential risks involved in this research are considered minimal, as participants are not expected to engage in any physically or psychologically risky activities.
7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult, or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

_____

Printed Name and Signature of ResearcherDate

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Printed Name and Signature of ParticipantDate

Please sign both copies. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data gathering. Merriam notes, “In this type of interview either the questions are more flexibly

worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions."[156] The open-ended nature of the interview questions enabled deeper exploration of the participants' responses to a complex issue. This semi-structured approach allowed the interviewer to "respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic."[157]

The researcher interviewed six ministry leaders for approximately one hour each. Prior to the interview, the participants received communication providing the purpose of the study and the research questions. To accommodate participant schedules and various time zones, the interviews were conducted and recorded using the Zoom platform. Zoom automatically generated both the audio recordings and written transcripts for each interview, and following each session, the researcher reviewed the transcript for accuracy and clarity. The audio and text files were then uploaded into ChatGPT, an AI organizational tool, which was used to create a more readable and structured version of each transcript. Once generated, the researcher reviewed the text again for clarity and accuracy. ChatGPT also assisted the researcher in organizing the data by grouping common themes and points of emphasis that appeared across all six interviews. This process enabled a clearer synthesis of the participant insights and assisted the thematic analysis.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. RQ1: How do the cultural backgrounds and behaviors of team members shape trust dynamics in multinational ministry teams?

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[156] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 90.

[157] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 90.

2. RQ2: What personal competencies are needed from members within a multinational context to cultivate trust?
3. RQ3: What practices do ministries employ to build trust among team members from multinational contexts?

The six ministry leaders that participated in this qualitative study represented diverse cultural and regional contexts within multinational ministry teams. Table 1 summarizes the demographic and vocational background of each participant. To ensure confidentiality, the names of the participants and their organizations were anonymized by using pseudonyms that reflect cultural authenticity without revealing personally identifiable details.

Pseudonym	Region of Service	Ministry / Organization (Pseudonym)	Current Role	Years in Role	Highest Education Level	Team Size / Ministry Reach	Distinctive Contextual Features
Christina	Kenya / United States	*Free Life International*	Co-founder and CEO	14 years	Master's	Serves over 200 individuals through global partnerships	Leads a cross-tribal, international ministry focused on empowerment and discipleship.
Kintu	Kenya	*Faith Life Church*	Founding Pastor and Team Leader	7 years (30 in ministry)	Master's	10 direct reports; congregation of 100+	Urban pastoral ministry emphasizing gospel-centered leadership and reconciliation.
Sophea	Cambodia / Southeast Asia	*Redeem Asia Network*	National Director	6 years	Bachelor's	3 direct reports; ministry reaches 1,000+ individuals	Bridges Western partners and Southeast Asian pastors through contextual training.
Santiago	Latin America / Brazil	*Equip Global Media*	Regional Director	7 years	Master's	3 direct; 30 indirect; 3,000+ churches served	Oversees multilingual media and leadership development initiatives across Latin America.
John	Uganda / East Asia	*Grace Front Ministries*	Executive Director	13 years	Master's	6 direct reports; 1,000+ served	Leads a holistic ministry for vulnerable children and families, integrating education and discipleship.
Debbie	Southeast Asia	*Global Hope Alliance*	President	12 years	Master's	73 staff; 2,500+ served	Directs international programs emphasizing partnership, transparency, and leadership development.

The information gathered from these six participants formed the foundation for the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis in this study followed a systematic and inductive approach consistent with qualitative research design. An inductive approach means that "Qualitative research builds toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field."[158] This approach allowed meaning to emerge directly from the data, which ensured that the findings reflect the authentic perspectives of the ministry leaders. The purpose was to identify and interpret themes that reveal how trust is cultivated and sustained within multinational ministry teams. Each interview was conducted, transcribed, and analyzed with attention to the participant's statements and stories. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, all quotations and themes were compared with the original transcripts. As Booth, Colomb, and Williams advise, "Remember that your report will be accurate only if you double-check your notes against your sources, and after your first draft, check your quotations against your notes."[159] This process maintained accuracy and reduced interpretive bias in the presentation of results.

Each interview was conducted and recorded through the Zoom platform, which also generated an automatic transcript of the interview. These transcripts were then reviewed and cleaned to ensure accuracy and readability. Both the audio recordings and written transcripts were uploaded into ChatGPT to assist the researcher in organizing the material into a more coherent format. Each interview was recorded and transcribed to provide a full textual record for analysis. Edgar Elliston, missiologist and retired

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[158] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 15.

[159] Booth et al., *The Craft of Research*, 99.

professor at the Cook School of Intercultural Studies, emphasizes that "Analyzing interviews begins with an accurate and complete transcription of the full text of an interview. Without a full transcript of an interview, a researcher has no data…it is the transcribed text that provides the initial data for coding."[160] This principle guided the careful transcription process prior to coding and thematic analysis. During this stage, initial observations were recorded to identify common themes that appeared across multiple interviews. The analysis began by identifying repeated ideas, terms, and categories used in the participants' responses. Elliston notes that "finding related information in the interviews or identifying internal terms, topics, or categories repeated by informants provides the initial coding that leads to further analysis and interviewing."[161] A process of open coding was then used to identify noteworthy statements and concepts. Coding is the "process of making notations next to bits of data that strike you as potentially relevant for answering your research questions…"[162] The codes were developed inductively rather than drawn from a predetermined framework, and this process allowed categories to emerge directly from the data. Examples of early codes included humility, relational trust, shared mission, communication barriers, and spiritual unity.

After the first round of open coding, the researcher grouped related codes by a process of axial coding, which is "the process of relating categories and properties to

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[160] Edgar J. Elliston, *Introduction to Missiological Research Design* (William Carey Library Publishers, 2011), 148.

[161] Elliston, *Missiological Research Design*, 149.

[162] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 178.

each other, refining the category scheme."[163] This step sought to connect individual experiences into recurring patterns of meaning. For example, codes such as authenticity, humility, integrity, and consistency were integrated into the category "Humility and Character," and references to reliability and faithfulness were placed within "Consistency and Reliability." Similarly, comments about shared meals, prayer, and regular gatherings were organized under the category "Relational Discipline," whereas practices of financial transparency, private correction, and forgiveness were combined within "Accountability and Grace."

Through comparison, 10 axial categories emerged that corresponded to one or more of the study's three research questions. These categories were synthesized into three overarching themes: character-based trust, relational-spiritual trust, and cultural-intelligent trust. Each theme was reviewed alongside the original transcripts to ensure that it accurately represented the participants' intended meanings. The analysis particularly focused on the theological, relational, and cultural assumptions that shaped the participants' perspectives on how trust is cultivated within multinational ministry teams.

The resulting themes, presented in Chapter 4, reflect the collective viewpoints of the ministry leaders who have navigated the complexities of multinational leadership. Their experiences provide insight into how trust is cultivated and sustained within the mission of God's global Kingdom.

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[163] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 200.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by Covenant Theological Seminary and the principles outlined in the Belmont Report for the protection of human subjects. Before the interviews, each participant received a written consent form detailing the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and all the measures that were to be taken to ensure confidentiality. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.

To safeguard privacy, all participants and organizational affiliations were assigned pseudonyms that maintained cultural authenticity while concealing any identifying information. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher. Following the completion of the dissertation, all identifiable data will be securely deleted.

The study involved minimal risk to participants. Nevertheless, care was taken to guarantee that no participant felt at risk of their names and comments being made known to their constituents. The interview process emphasized respect and gratitude for each participant's contribution to the global church.

The researcher used AI software and online grammar help, specifically ChatGPT and Grammarly, solely as an organizational aid to proofread, refine words and statements, format, and categorize interview transcripts. All interpretation and analysis were performed by the researcher.

Throughout the research process, the researcher sought to maintain an ethical awareness of his own position as both a ministry leader and a researcher. This approach

helped to minimize interpretive bias and ensured that the participants' voices were represented with fairness and integrity.

Researcher's Position

Qualitative research requires the researcher to acknowledge their position and perspectives since they serve as the primary collector and interpreter of the data. The meaning of an experience is constructed through interaction with participants and is shaped by the researcher's own worldview and experiences. Expressing the researcher's position provides transparency and allows readers to better understand how conclusions are drawn from the data.

The researcher of this study is an ordained Christian missionary with extensive experience in multinational ministry leadership. He currently serves in an executive leadership role within a ministry organization that operates across various cultural and theological contexts. This background has provided much exposure to the relational dynamics and leadership challenges that are commonly associated with multinational ministry teams. These experiences informed both the development of the research questions and the interpretation of the participants' responses.

The researcher identifies within the Reformed theological tradition and serves within evangelical ministry settings. While this theological positioning has shaped the researcher's understanding of leadership and trust, the study was not designed to evaluate theological correctness or promote a particular confessional position. The researcher approached the interviews as a curious listener seeking to understand how trust is cultivated and sustained among executive-level leaders serving in culturally diverse ministry contexts. Since the researcher shares professional similarities with many of the

participants, such as leadership responsibilities and ministry experience, care was taken to allow the perspectives of the participants to guide the analysis. The research process also focused on the data so that the interpretations reflected the perspectives expressed by the participants rather than the researcher's prior assumptions or experiences.

Study Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study includes limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. Acknowledging these limitations clarifies the scope of the study and places its conclusions within the context in which the research was conducted. First, the findings are drawn from a relatively small sample of executive-level leaders serving on multinational ministry teams. This group provided detailed accounts of their leadership experience across cultures. Since the sample does not capture the full diversity of roles, regions, theological leanings, or organizational settings present within multinational ministry work, the findings should be understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Second, the study reflects the perspectives of senior leaders rather than those of team members at other organizational levels. Executive leaders often possess a different view of organizational dynamics. They may not experience trust in the same way as staff members or volunteers who operate closer to daily operations. As a result, the findings are based on the interpretations from executive leaders and how they form and cultivate trust. Including voices from multiple levels could yield a richer understanding of trust within ministry teams.

Third, the qualitative design of the study prioritizes depth of understanding over scope of representation. The findings are based on participants' self-reported experiences

and interpretations of those experiences. These accounts are shaped by memory and personal reflection. While coding and thematic analysis were used to enhance credibility, the study is best understood as offering interpretive insight rather than statistical claims.

Fourth, the researcher's background in ministry leadership shaped the research process in important ways. His familiarity with ministry contexts helped establish trust and provided ease during the interviews, which helped the participants to speak openly. Throughout the study, care was taken to remain focused on participants' own language and experiences rather than allowing the researcher's prior personal ministry expectations to direct the findings.

Finally, the study is situated within a particular theological and missional framework. The findings are interpreted through a Christian theological lens that emphasizes covenant, community, leadership, and life under Christ. While this framework is appropriate for the study's purpose and context, the findings may be less transferable to secular organizations or leadership contexts that operate from different assumptions. Therefore, readers should consider the theological commitments that inform the analysis when applying the study's insights to non-Christian settings.

These limitations suggest that the findings of this study are best understood as highly contextual and theologically informed. They also highlight areas where future research may extend and deepen the understanding of trust within multinational ministry leadership.

Summary

This chapter presented the methodology used to explore how ministry leaders cultivate trust within multinational ministry contexts. The study employed a qualitative

design utilizing semi-structured interviews to capture the experiences and reflections of six leaders serving across diverse cultural and organizational settings. Each participant was purposefully selected to provide insight into how trust is formed and sustained within the complexities of global ministry.

The chapter described the design of the study, the participant selection process, and the methods of data collection. A summary of participant demographics was also included. The chapter outlined the systematic approach to data analysis, including open and axial coding procedures that identified recurring patterns and overarching themes. Ethical considerations were addressed to ensure confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the protection of participants' rights throughout the research process.

The framework of this study was guided by three central research questions that focus on cultural backgrounds and behaviors, personal competencies, and intentional practices that influence trust dynamics in multinational ministry teams. These categories provide the structure for interpreting the data and serve as the organizing framework for the presentation of findings. Chapter 4 presents the research findings by exploring the major themes that emerged from the interviews and illustrating how leaders across diverse contexts cultivate trust through cultural understanding, personal character, and intentional relational and organizational practices.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore how trust is cultivated within multinational ministry teams, particularly in settings where cultural, linguistic, and theological differences are present within the daily work of leadership. Trust is essential for unity in any ministry context. However, in multinational teams, it is often more complex and, at times, fragile. To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. RQ1: How do the cultural backgrounds and behaviors of team members shape trust dynamics in multinational ministry teams?
2. RQ2: What personal competencies are needed from members within a multinational context to cultivate trust?
3. RQ3: What intentional practices do multinational ministry teams use to cultivate and sustain trust across cultural boundaries?

Introductions to Participants and Context

Each participant in this study serves in a cross-cultural environment, and they are distinguished by their age, location, gender, diversity of worldview, communication patterns, and ministry expectations. Their reflections reveal how trust is built, tested, and strengthened as leaders who work across cultures for the sake of the Gospel.

Six ministry leaders participated in this study, and they each represent a distinct region and ministry context. Their combined experience spans Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and North America, and their roles involve collaboration with partners

from multiple countries and traditions. Although their settings differ, all of them lead teams that require cooperation among people who do not share the same cultural traditions or communication styles. Therefore, their insights provide a valuable window into the relational and organizational dynamics that contribute to cultivating trust in international ministry work.

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from their interviews and the analysis. The study was guided by three research questions that explore how trust is cultivated within multinational ministry teams: how do cultural backgrounds and behaviors shape trust dynamics, what personal competencies are needed to cultivate trust in culturally diverse settings, and what intentional practices do teams use to sustain trust over time? Through open and axial coding, three overarching areas of emphasis emerged, and each corresponded to one of the research questions and reflected a distinct aspect of trust that was identified across the interviews. The first area, cultural backgrounds and behaviors, captured the cultural, organizational, and contextual factors that either support or strain trust within multinational ministry teams. The second area, personal competencies, reflected the character qualities and leadership postures that participants identified as essential for cultivating trust across cultural boundaries. The third area, intentional practices, focused on the relational and spiritual habits that teams employ to nurture trust over time.

Although these areas provide a framework for presenting the findings, the participants' reflections did not fall neatly into isolated categories. Instead, they revealed how trust develops through the interaction of culture, character, and shared spiritual life. Trust emerged as a relational and theological commitment that was expressed through

consistent, humble practices. As the interviews indicate, cultivating trust within multinational ministry teams requires ongoing attention to cultural dynamics and intentional relational practices that reflect the grace of Christ.

This chapter presents the findings in three sections. The first section examines how cultural backgrounds and behaviors shape trust dynamics. The second explores the personal competencies that the leaders consider to be essential for cultivating trust in multinational contexts. The final section considers the intentional practices teams use to cultivate and sustain trust across cultural boundaries.

Cultural Backgrounds and Behaviors

This section addresses the first research question of how the cultural backgrounds and behaviors of team members shape trust dynamics within multinational ministry teams. Drawing from the participants' experiences, the findings highlight how communication norms, time orientation, honor, respect, and shared cultural practices influence the development and erosion of trust across diverse contexts. Trust within multinational ministry teams develops within cultural and organizational contexts that shape how people relate, communicate, and make decisions. The participants in this study repeatedly emphasized that trust is personal and is deeply influenced by the cultural dynamics and the ministry systems of the team. Depending on the team, the structures can nurture trust or strain it. Although the six leaders represented different regions and ministry roles, their experiences reveal similar patterns in how communication, expectations, honor, and shared practices shape trust.

Communication

All six participants acknowledged that communication differences were one of the most persistent challenges in establishing trust. Santiago, serving across Latin America, noted that team members often assume shared meaning simply because they share a language of communication. In reality, what feels transparent to one culture may feel abrupt or even disrespectful to another. He explained that North American colleagues often communicate in ways that are considerably direct; while this approach is meant to ensure clarity, sometimes is feels too forceful in Latin America. Sophea, in Southeast Asia, echoed this sentiment when she described how direct feedback from North Americans sometimes felt jarring. When they said, "That won't work," she felt like they did not trust her. However, she said that when teammates acknowledged these differences, trust grew. Furthermore, when they ask how Cambodians leaders act, she feels respected. Kintu, serving in Kenya, related to this sentiment. He observed that North Americans often interpret hesitation or silence as avoidance, but it is a culturally appropriate way of showing respect while processing disagreement. If silence is misread as apathy or lack of preparation, trust can weaken quickly. In contrast, Christina, who works between Kenya and the United States, said she learned that direct communication strengthens trust when the intent is clearly relational rather than confrontational. She noted that some Kenyan teammates initially misinterpreted bluntness as disrespect, but once the motives were clarified, the directness helped avoid confusion. Across regions, the leaders found that trust deepens when teammates take time to understand the relational meaning behind each other's communication styles rather than assuming meaning.

Interpreting Silence—Tone and Context

Several of the participants come from high-context cultures and they explained that much of their communication relies on tone or context instead of explicit words or phrases. Sophea said that silence often communicates respect or uncertainty rather than disinterest. She recalled moments when Western teammates interpreted her quietness as agreement, even when it meant the opposite. Over time, she learned to clarify her meaning explicitly in cross-cultural settings, and her teammates learned not to read silence as passivity. John, currently working in Uganda but having worked across Japan, Korea, and the Philippines, described how indirectness functions differently in each Asian context. He emphasized that trust was damaged when North Americans publicly confronted their teammates for small issues, not realizing that such correction deeply undermines relational dignity. For example, one North American corrected a Japanese brother in a group meeting, and that one moment damaged the trust for months. Debbie, who leads teams across Southeast Asia, said she learned to listen between the lines. When colleagues said something might be difficult, she came to recognize that it often meant, "I disagree, but I am too respectful to say so openly." Based on this understanding, she changed how she followed up with them privately, allowing space for honest dialogue while protecting dignity. Across the interviews, the leaders described that trust increases when teammates slowed conversations to confirm meaning, asked clarifying questions, and took the necessary time to restate what they heard. These practices turned communication differences into opportunities for deeper understanding.

Time Emphasis and Expectations

Almost every leader described that tension arises from differing cultural expectations regarding time. While Western teammates often equate punctuality and strict timelines with reliability, several participants, particularly those serving in Africa, described a relational orientation to time in which human presence takes priority over strict scheduling. Kintu explained that a delay of 15–20 minutes is not considered disrespectful in many Kenyan settings, yet North American teammates sometimes interpret it as a lack of seriousness or trustworthiness. Conversely, when Western partners insisted on rigid deadlines, some local leaders felt pressured or misunderstood. Santiago described similar dynamics in Latin America. Meetings that North Americans expected to last one hour often flowed naturally into longer relational conversations. In such situations, trust increased when the Western teammates recognized that relational emphasis was not inefficiency but rather an expression of shared life. Christina, whose team spans Kenya and the United States, described having to translate certain expectations; while her American colleagues thought that flexible timing reflected a lack of commitment, her Kenyan teammates felt demeaned by strict schedules. All the leaders agreed that trust is strengthened when expectations regarding time are named and collaboratively negotiated rather than assumed.

Reporting and Accountability

Financial communication and reporting surfaced as another consistent theme relating to trust. Several participants described situations where Western partners introduced detailed reporting systems that were intended to ensure accountability, but they unintentionally strained relationships. Debbie described a moment when an African

partner did not report underspending a grant before the deadline, and her North American finance officer interpreted such action as a cover-up. Later she learned that the partner withheld the information to avoid causing embarrassment, which was a culturally honorable motivation. Once the misunderstanding was clarified, trust was restored. Santiago recounted an instance where a major budget change was sent to him through a blunt email from a North American partner. From his perspective, this approach communicated disregard for his team's real-world realities. He noted that the issue was not the financial decision itself but the method of communication - it felt like they did not care about how the decision affected people. Kintu also emphasized that trust increases when accountability systems include conversation and context rather than unilateral decisions. The leaders generally affirmed that financial transparency builds trust but only when the systems honor relational norms and local insight.

Honor and Respect

Honor, hierarchy, and respect play a significant role in how the participants understand trust, especially in teams involving Asian and African cultures. Sophea explained that in Cambodian and Southeast Asian contexts, hierarchy provides structure to conversations. Junior team members rarely contradict leaders openly, and disagreement is expressed indirectly to preserve honor. When Western teammates push for open debate, local leaders may participate yet remain uncomfortable doing so. Although they may nod in agreement during a meeting, she may later find out that they did not actually agree. Debbie observed this regularly in Thailand and Kenya. She learned that Western encouragement to "speak up" sometimes violated local expressions of humility. In one case, a North American's well-intended urge to communicate left a

Kenyan colleague feeling judged because the expectation to speak conflicted with his cultural value of restraint. John also described the destructive effect of public correction in Asian contexts. He shared an example of how the act of a Western colleague confronting a Japanese team member in a public meeting damaged trust for a long time. John now teaches missionaries to offer correction privately and affirmations publicly. Christina also added a unique perspective from her work among various Kenyan tribes. She found that recognizing tribal differences and showing care for cultural identity strengthened trust, particularly when team members felt marginalized or overlooked by dominant cultural groups. Across contexts, the leaders emphasized that trust grows when dignity is protected and respect is highly valued. Furthermore, if disagreement occurs, it must be handled with sensitivity.

Shared Experiences

The participants identified cultural structures that fostered trust, particularly through shared experiences. In particular, meals played a significant role for all of the leaders. Kintu emphasized that in Kenya, everything happens over food, and sitting together communicates belonging more than any meeting agenda. Sophea described meals on the floor of Cambodian homes as moments when Western partners demonstrated humility, which instantly bridged cultural barriers. Debbie found that shared meals helped her teams in Thailand and Kenya shift from formal partnerships to family-like relationships. Santiago likewise noted that relational gatherings in Latin America often accomplish more trust-building than formal meetings. These contexts reduced misunderstandings and enabled difficult conversations to occur later with greater trust.

Several leaders indicated that worship was a structural anchor for trust. John recalled a regional retreat where Japanese, Filipino, Korean, and North American leaders shared songs from their own cultures. This moment of multicultural worship created admiration and softened the room, which allowed for more honest dialogue afterward. Santiago noted that prayer meetings, particularly when conducted in multiple languages, re-centered his team on the shared mission.

Finally, the participants emphasized that physical presence communicates value in ways digital communication cannot. Christina, working across continents, observed that trust deepened most when partners visited Kenya, sat with her team, and heard their stories firsthand. Sophea expressed the same: “When they eat our food and sit on the floor with us, trust grows quickly.” In such cases, physical presence is an expression of respect.

Personal Competencies

The second research question sought to determine the personal competencies that participants identified as essential for cultivating trust within multinational ministry teams. The findings emphasize character-based qualities such as humility, listening, integrity, emotional and spiritual maturity, and adaptability as critical to sustaining trust across cultural boundaries. While cultural structures shape the environment in which trust develops, the participants emphasized that trust is ultimately cultivated through the character and posture of the leaders themselves. In multinational ministry contexts, trust is built primarily through the competencies of those who lead. Participants described these internal systems as more than personality traits. They recognized them as theological commitments shaped by Scripture and refined through cross-cultural ministry

experience. Through these experiences, they came to recognize that trustworthy leadership depends on the character and the internal life of the leader. Trust is created when leaders demonstrate Christian character, humility, and a posture of learning. In cross-cultural ministry, these qualities become even more necessary because misunderstanding is common and cultural assumptions differ.

Humility

Of all the qualities discussed, humility emerged the most frequently, and every participant highlighted humility as being essential for building trust across cultures. They described humility as a posture of self-awareness, teachability, and respect rather than as low self-esteem or passivity. They described it as a willingness to learn from others and defer recognition for the sake of team unity. Several leaders rooted humility in their understanding of Christian discipleship instead of understanding it as a cultural preference. Christina explained that humility allows a leader to enter another person's world without assuming superiority. For her, humility enables cross-cultural learning, because being humble means resisting the impulse to project one's own cultural logic onto others. She noted that humility helps her navigate cultural differences as she works between Kenya and the United States. For her, humility means placing Christ in the center, rather than her own cultural way. Sophea echoed this thought when she described humility as a spiritual discipline. Serving in a region shaped by hierarchy and indirect communication, she said humility helps her maintain a learner's posture even when she holds positional authority. If she is not humble, people will not tell her the truth, and they will "honor her with silence." For her, humility invites honesty, which is essential for trust. Debbie also described humility as the "antidote to leadership pride." Leading a

large organization across Southeast Asia, she emphasized that humility is essential. Her team needs to recognize that she is submitted to the Lord and willing to be wrong. She said humility enables leaders to absorb tension rather than react defensively, especially in cultures where team members may hesitate to confront conflict.

Humility also functions as a cross-cultural tool. Santiago said humility made him aware of how quickly Western assumptions can dominate international partnerships. As a Brazilian leading teams across Latin America, he explained that partners sometimes expect him to adopt North American planning structures or decision-making models. Humility allows him to recognize what is beneficial while resisting the pressure to abandon local wisdom. He described that having humility means he holds his own perspective lightly enough that others feel respected. John, serving throughout Uganda and East Asia, offered a similar insight. He said that humility empowers a leader to slow down, take a step back, observe, and seek understanding before offering opinions. In hierarchical contexts, where leaders are expected to have answers, humility disrupts harmful patterns by signaling openness to feedback. When a leader shows humility, the other team members are granted permission to speak.

Kintu articulated humility as the willingness to be taught by younger or less-experienced colleagues, which is concept that feels countercultural in some African settings. He explained that humility enables him to listen carefully even when someone speaks indirectly. He noted, “If leaders do not have humility, they may misjudge the quietness.” In Kintu’s context, humility allows him to slow down and recognize what someone may be trying to express beneath their cultural formality.

The participants also emphasized that humility helps prevent the defensiveness that often arises in multicultural communication. Christina shared that early in her ministry, differences in work rhythms or communication styles sometimes felt like personal offenses. Over time, she learned that humility helps to reshape these moments. Without humility, she assumes her team was resisting or misunderstanding on purpose. With humility, she assumes she may be misunderstanding them. Debbie expressed that humility is necessary when addressing conflict. She described moments when she initially believed she was acting honorably, only to later discover her approach had unintentionally damaged trust. Humility enabled her to confess wrongdoing and restore the relationship. For Debbie, humility is not weakness; it is the only path forward when working in different cultures. Santiago also acknowledged how humility protected him against the temptation to micromanage. He explained that humility frees a leader to trust others with responsibility. Trust grows when people recognize that leaders do not need to control everything.

The participants consistently described humility as a key factor in cultivating unity within culturally diverse ministry teams. Rather than allowing cultural differences to create competition, humility reshaped such differences as opportunities for mutual respect and learning. John observed that "humility helps team members feel valued," even when their leadership styles do not align with Western expectations. Kintu similarly emphasized that "humility models the Gospel itself" and that ministry centers on God's work rather than personal accomplishment. Across the six interviews, humility functions as a force of stability that encourages honest dialogue. Ultimately, the participants described humility as the posture that forms the foundation of trust.

Listening and Empathy

Humility is the internal posture necessary for cross-cultural trust, and it is practiced by listening and showing empathy. Every participant described listening as an intentional effort to understand the meaning behind what is said, and at times what remains unsaid, within culturally diverse teams. In the interviews, listening emerged as one of the most decisive competencies for leaders working across different cultural norms, and the participants view it as essential for strengthening relational unity. Sophea emphasized that listening across cultures requires more patience and discernment than leaders initially expect. For example, she notes that in the Southeast Asian context words often carry layered meaning, and people rarely state disagreements directly. Listening between the lines is often the only way to understand concerns that teammates feel uncomfortable expressing openly. Early in her ministry, Sophea misread polite affirmations as genuine agreement, which led to confusion and disappointment when team members later hesitated to carry out decisions that had been made. Over time, she learned that deeper listening revealed what teammates were actually thinking. When Western partners learned these cues alongside her, trust deepened on all sides. Furthermore, John contrasted Western verbal processing with Japanese, Korean, and Filipino communication patterns. He noted that Western teammates sometimes assume that whoever speaks most confidently has the clearest idea. In reality, in many Asian cultures, the most thoughtful voices may speak last or only after private reflection. When Western partners slowed down, allowed for silence, and gently asked follow-up questions, their Asian colleagues began to speak more freely. Trust grew because they no longer felt pressured to match the Western expectations of quick, public articulation.

The participants admitted that their early cross-cultural mistakes frequently stemmed from making assumptions. Christina explained that she sometimes assumed teammates were unprepared when they hesitated to respond in meetings. Later, she realized they were processing in a manner based on their cultural norms. Listening corrected her assumptions. When she slowed down to hear why they were quiet, she found wisdom that she had almost missed. Debbie shared a similar realization. In one instance, she assumed a Thai colleague was disengaged because he rarely spoke during staff updates. When she finally asked privately about his silence, he told her he did not want to appear prideful by presenting his work in a public setting. His silence communicated humility, not indifference.

Several participants described listening as an act of mutual vulnerability. Santiago explained that leaders gain trust by creating space for others to share openly instead of speaking first. He found that when he admitted his own misunderstandings or asked for help in interpreting certain cultural dynamics his teammates responded with appreciation. Listening shows that leaders are not pretending to understand everything. When leaders listen, they demonstrate that their team members can be vulnerable and honest.

Finally, the participants described listening as a theological practice. Sophea and Debbie both mentioned that listening mirrors God's posture toward His people. Santiago described listening as a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work by softening one's heart to understand those who are different. Across the interviews, listening functioned not only as a leadership skill but also as a spiritual virtue that made trust possible in culturally complex settings.

Integrity and Reliability

Beyond humility and listening, leaders identified reliability and integrity as key foundations for trust. While communication styles and cultural expectations vary widely, reliability transcends cultural boundaries. Participants repeatedly emphasized that good character brings stability to relationships that might otherwise be shaken by misunderstanding. Christina observed that cultural complexities often produce uncertainty. For this reason, teammates look for predictability in the behavior of leaders. She noted that when her teams encountered unexpected challenges, trust grew because she responded the same way in every context. She remained calm, transparent, and committed to them and the mission. They know what to expect from her and that steadiness builds trust. Santiago echoed this point. He said that in a multinational ministry, leaders cannot control every variable, but they can control their consistency. Team members from several countries came to rely on his predictable follow-through, especially in times of stress. For team members, consistency communicates safety.

The participants also highlighted integrity as a visible understanding of trustworthy leadership. Debbie described integrity as a "long obedience in the same direction, where a leader's public commitments match their private decisions." She explained that in cultures where face-saving is common, people pay close attention to whether leaders' actions align with what they say. John added that integrity includes honoring commitments even when plans must change. He explained that failing to communicate changes in advance, especially in Asia, can cause team members to feel dishonored or marginalized. In his experience, integrity requires not only keeping promises but also clearly communicating when circumstances shift.

The participants noted that reliability in financial and administrative matters is especially important across cultures. Sophea noted that Western partners consistently provide timely reports, seek clarity before making any adjustments, and avoid surprise decisions. Local leaders interpret these actions as expressions of respect and trustworthiness. Conversely, even the unintentional lack of reliability in these systems can strain relationships. Kintu emphasized that reliability in spiritual matters builds trust just as much as reliability in administrative work. When he shows up consistently for pastoral care, discipleship meetings, or times of prayer, his team recognizes that leadership is built on more than completing daily tasks.

Maturity

The participants described emotional and spiritual maturity as essential internal systems for trustworthy leadership. Such maturity helps leaders respond wisely to cultural conflict and personal misunderstanding. Debbie explained that cross-cultural leadership inevitably includes moments of tension. A leader who reacts defensively will quickly escalate conflict. One who interprets disagreement personally will damage trust. Emotional maturity allows leaders to regulate their responses and maintain composure. Santiago shared that he had to learn not to assume negative intent when communication breaks down. Emotional maturity enabled him to pause before interpreting, which protected relationships and prevented unnecessary mistrust.

Participants also described cultural fatigue as the exhaustion that comes from navigating ongoing cultural differences. Emotional maturity helps leaders maintain patience rather than slipping into cultural stereotypes or frustration. Sophea said that when she feels overwhelmed by cultural tension, she prays for renewed patience to

interpret situations fairly rather than react hastily. Christina added that extending grace, especially when misunderstandings arise, is a sign of emotional maturity that brings stability to trust. When teams observe leaders respond with compassion rather than frustration, they feel safer when sharing concerns. The participants consistently described trust-building as spiritual instead of simply interpersonal. John said that teams look for leaders whose relationship with Christ is of the utmost importance and is evidenced through their humility and graciousness. Spiritual maturity allows leaders to respond as disciples rather than merely as managers. Kintu explained that humility, forgiveness, patience, and prayerful dependence are the fruit of spiritual maturity. His team trusts him because they recognize these qualities lived out consistently and not because he has mastered every cultural nuance. Spiritual and emotional maturity sustains unity and is necessary for the cultivation of trust.

Adaptability

Finally, leaders emphasized adaptability as a defining trait of trustworthy leadership in multinational ministry. Adaptability is not weakness. It is the willingness to adjust methods, ministry speed, communication styles, and expectations for the sake of the unity of the team. Santiago noted that adaptability requires learning when to assert structure and when to defer to relational rhythms. Adaptability shows team members that leaders are serving them rather than themselves. Debbie shared how she adapted meeting structures after realizing that her Asian staff preferred questions to be asked privately rather than in open forums. This simple adjustment increased participation and strengthened trust.

The participants emphasized that adaptability does not mean theological compromise. Instead, adaptability requires leaders to discern which leadership behaviors are cultural expressions and which ones reflect biblical principles. Christina explained that while biblical truth remains constant, the way leaders guide people toward that truth must adapt to their cultural context. This discernment becomes important in multicultural ministry environments. For example, John described adjusting his leadership pace when working with Japanese teammates. He recognized that building consensus often requires more time in high-context cultures. By adapting his approach, he honored cultural norms while maintaining clear biblical direction. This approach deepened trust within the team. The participants consistently linked this kind of adaptability to humility. Sophea noted that people trust leaders who demonstrate a willingness to learn and adjust. When they observe her being flexible, they recognize that they are valued. In this way, adaptability functions as a relational bridge in multicultural settings.

Summary of Cultural Backgrounds and Behaviors

In all six interviews, the participants described humility, listening, integrity, emotional and spiritual maturity, and adaptability as essential personal competencies for cultivating trust. These competencies allowed leaders to navigate cross-cultural complexities with patience, wisdom, and reliability. In each case, the leader's character served as the decisive factor in building and sustaining trust.

Intentional Practices

The third research question examines the intentional practices that multinational ministry teams use to cultivate and sustain trust over time. The participants described

relational and spiritual rhythms, including shared prayer, Scripture, hospitality, accountability, and consistent relational presence, as central practices that reinforce trust across different cultural contexts. Though trustworthy structures and systems shape the environment of multinational leadership, the participants emphasized that trust ultimately grows through relationships. In multinational ministry teams, relational investment is not supplementary to the work—it is the work. Trustworthy relationships give form to the theological commitments discussed in the literature review, including unity in Christ, mutual dependence, shared calling, and the ministry of reconciliation. These relationships do not emerge automatically in diverse teams, so they require purposeful engagement.

The participants described several relational practices that built and sustained trust over time. These practices were not identical across contexts, yet all six leaders identified them as essential to cultivating a sense of belonging and unity within their teams. This section presents those findings, beginning with the spiritual practices that participants viewed as the foundation of relational trust.

Shared Spiritual Practices

Prayer was the most frequently named relational practice in building and sustaining trust. The participants framed prayer as both a spiritual and a relational discipline. In multiple interviews, prayer was identified as an act that unites leaders beyond cultural differences. Christina explained that when her multinational team prays together, they remember that they serve the same Lord and depend on the same grace. Prayer reorients the team toward a shared identity rooted in Christ rather than cultural preferences. Santiago described prayer as the moment when "walls come down." In his Latin American context, teammates often struggle to express disagreement openly due to

politeness or the fear of dishonoring others. He noted that during prayer, honesty emerges more naturally. People confess burdens in a time of prayer that they would not say in a meeting. Therefore, prayer becomes a relational equalizer and a place where cultural barriers soften, which allows trust to grow.

John emphasized that Scripture provided a unifying narrative for teams from Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and the United States. Reading and reflecting on Scripture together gives team members a shared interpretive framework through which to understand leadership decisions, conflict, and the mission itself. The Bible becomes the anchor by giving them the same starting point despite their cultural differences. Debbie expressed that Scripture grounds teams in humility and grace, especially when misunderstandings or cultural tensions arise. For her, beginning leadership meetings with Scripture was not a symbolic gesture but practical in purpose as it aligns teams before they talk about difficult topics.

Sophea and Kintu both described worship as a space where trust grows beyond words. Sophea noted that worship allows her team to experience an emotional connection that transcends languages. Even when they do not understand each other's words, they understand each other's worship. Kintu said that singing together in different languages, including Swahili, English, and tribal languages, reminds his team that their unity is spiritual and not merely organizational.

These spiritual rhythms of prayer, Scripture, and worship function as relational anchors. When practiced consistently, they help team members maintain unity and trust one another's intentions.

Relational Habits and Rhythms

Aside from shared spiritual practices, the leaders described relational habits that built trust through listening and making informal connections. Debbie practiced monthly one-on-one check-ins with her global staff. She explained that trust cannot rely on formal meetings alone. Leaders must create private spaces where teammates feel safe expressing concerns. These check-ins allowed her to identify misunderstandings early, and regular relational investment prevented small issues from escalating. Santiago similarly emphasized relational follow-up. After meetings, he often reached out individually to clarify concerns or listen more fully. This practice communicated care and ensured that relational frustrations did not remain unaddressed.

Several leaders described the power of visiting team members. Intentional trips to teammates' local contexts for the purpose of learning, not evaluating, are a valuable practice. Christina highlighted that when North American partners visit Kenya simply to listen and understand the ministry setting, trust grows faster than any report can measure. She observed that presence communicates solidarity far more than written communication ever could. Sophea shared that when Western partners sit on the floor in Cambodian homes with a desire to learn local customs and share meals, "they enter their world." These visits humanize the relationship and affirm dignity, which strengthens trust across cultural boundaries.

Meals emerged again as a relational catalyst. Kintu described shared meals as the safest places for difficult conversations because meals create warmth that formal meetings often lack. Celebrations such as birthdays, holidays, and ministry milestones also strengthened relational bonds. Debbie's organization hosted annual global retreats where staff shared testimonies, prayed together, and engaged in team-building. She said

these gatherings reset trust after a long year of virtual communication. Sophea noted that relational warmth often precedes relational honesty. Furthermore, her team schedules relational time intentionally before addressing sensitive matters.

Accountability

The participants were clear that accountability, when practiced in culturally appropriate ways, strengthens trust. They highlighted several practices that support relational integrity. Financial communication was an important trust factor mentioned in all the interviews. Santiago emphasized that transparency builds confidence when it is approached collaboratively. Some Western partners treat accountability as control, but trust grows when accountability is framed as shared stewardship. Debbie described systems that her organization created to ensure clarity while maintaining flexibility. She noted that when financial expectations are communicated relationally, trust deepens because people feel respected.

In honor-shame cultures, public correction damages trust. John noted that in Japan, Korea, and parts of Southeast Asia, people will withdraw relationally if corrected publicly. He now offers correction privately whenever possible and makes affirmations publicly to maintain dignity. Sophea shared a similar insight. When a Western partner confronted a Cambodian colleague in a group meeting, trust was fractured. He corrected the behavior, but he wounded the person. Since then, she has trained Western partners to use private conversations for correction unless public clarification is absolutely necessary.

Honesty about mistakes, especially from leaders, was repeatedly identified as a trust-builder. Christina said that when she acknowledges her own missteps, her team

becomes more willing to admit their struggles. Santiago said that mistakes handled with grace become turning points in team unity. In one instance, he mismanaged a communication plan that created confusion across teams. Instead of minimizing the mistake, he addressed it openly and took responsibility. This action increased trust because it showed he was not hiding anything.

The participants also framed forgiveness as a disciplined practice that sustains long-term trust. Kintu explained that trust inevitably breaks at times in multicultural work, but restoration is part of Christian leadership. Debbie noted that when leaders model forgiveness rather than defensiveness, it communicates emotional safety and spiritual maturity. Forgiveness steers relationships back on the path of unity.

Godly Character

The participants consistently described godly character as something formed and revealed over time. Character is particularly formed through everyday interactions, including challenging circumstances. Christina noted that trust increased as her team observed her character across a variety of settings, including moments of crisis, financial conversations, times of stress, and seasons of celebration. These observations allowed team members to discern not only competence in her role but also personal integrity. Sophea and Kintu both emphasized that trust grows when leaders demonstrate genuine care for people beyond their ministry roles. Various acts, such as asking about team members' families, praying for personal needs, and remembering significant life events, communicate love and honor. These practices reflect a relational posture rooted in Christlike care and help establish a foundation where correction, organizational planning, and daily ministry tasks can be performed with greater unity and trust.

Across the interviews, the participants further highlighted that trust is strengthened when leaders exhibit consistent patterns of grace. Debbie observed that team members pay close attention to how leaders respond to conflict, disappointment, success, and failure. When leaders demonstrate emotional steadiness and relational grace, they create a sense of safety within the team. John summarized this insight by noting, "Trust is not built on perfect leadership but on consistent, gracious leadership." His reflection emphasizes a broader theme of godly character not being defined by perfection but by a sustained pattern of humility, grace, and reliability over time. These findings suggest that trust in multicultural ministry contexts is deeply rooted in the visible and consistent expression of Christlike character in both ordinary and high-pressure moments.

Summary of Findings

The participants described trust as the fruit of intentional relational investment that was shaped by humility, grace, and spiritual maturity. Trust was cultivated through practices such as prayer, engagement with Scripture, shared meals, private correction, forgiveness, and sustained relational presence. Together, these practices hold culturally diverse teams together. Trust increased when leaders intentionally invested in relationships, and it diminished when relationships were assumed rather than nurtured.

Across all six interviews, an understanding of trust in multinational ministry teams emerged. While participants represented different regions, organizations, roles, and cultural settings, their experiences revealed common patterns that illuminate how trust is cultivated and sustained in multinational ministry contexts. These findings demonstrate that trust is shaped through the interaction of cultural backgrounds and behaviors,

personal competencies, and intentional practices, much more than through organizational policies alone.

Humility emerged as the most consistent and foundational theme across all cases. The participants described humility as both a personal disposition and a theological commitment that was rooted in the dependence on Christ and submission to the work of the Holy Spirit. In cross-cultural settings, humility became visible through a leader's willingness to learn from local voices, acknowledge personal limitations, and receive correction without defensiveness. This posture shaped every dimension of trust described in the findings. Humility enabled leaders to interpret misunderstandings without assuming negative intent and to create space for listening in both high and low contexts. In this way, humility functions as both a good character trait and as the theological foundation upon which trust is built and sustained.

Communication differences were identified as the most frequent source of tension within multinational teams. However, these differences also became a primary means through which trust deepened if they were approached with patience and cultural sensitivity. The participants recalled early experiences of misinterpreting silence, tone, and direct or indirect forms of speech. Over time, these differences became opportunities for growth as the leaders learned to listen carefully and seek understanding. Active listening transformed communication challenges into moments of relational learning. When leaders slowed conversations to ask clarifying questions and to demonstrate curiosity, misunderstandings no longer fractured relationships but instead strengthened trust through mutual understanding.

The participants also emphasized that trust develops gradually through consistency of character. Rather than being established quickly, trust was formed over time and through observable integrity, reliability, emotional steadiness, and spiritual maturity. In complex cross-cultural environments, such consistency provided a needed source of stability. Regardless of background, team members trusted leaders whose lives demonstrated alignment between words and actions. This trust particularly grew in moments of tension or suffering. The participants highlighted that key factors for this alignment were emotional maturity during conflict and spiritual resilience rooted in dependence on Christ. In this way, Christian character was not understood as an abstract competency but a lived reality that was continually experienced and cultivated amongst teammates.

Finally, participants emphasized that trust ultimately flourishes within intentional, grace-filled relationships, and it must be understood as a shared responsibility rather than the responsibility of a single leader. Shared meals, listening visits, worship gatherings, personal check-ins, and private corrections provided relational spaces where cultural differences could be understood and unity strengthened. These acts embodied theological convictions. Meals expressed fellowship, prayer and Scripture reinforced shared identity in Christ, private correction preserved dignity, and forgiveness sustained unity. The participants consistently described that team members nurtured trust together through shared spiritual rhythms, healthy communication habits, mutual learning, and common faithfulness to Christ and His mission.

This synthesis of the six cases affirms that trust is ultimately theological at its core. It is shaped by how leaders reflect the reliability of God and the humility of Christ,

rely on the wisdom of Scripture, are led by the Holy Spirit, and pursue reconciliation within the diversity of God's people. These findings set the stage for Chapter 5, which analyzes the themes alongside the literature review in Chapter 2. The goal is to articulate how these findings confirm, deepen, or extend existing scholarship on trust within multinational leadership and to offer implications for leaders seeking to build trust within their ministry teams.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

This study examines how trust is cultivated and sustained among executive-level leaders serving on multinational ministry teams. Through qualitative interviews with leaders working across cultural, linguistic, and theological differences, the research explored the dynamics through which trust is formed, strained, repaired, sustained, and expressed in complex ministry environments. The findings presented in Chapter 4 demonstrate that trust in multinational ministry teams does not emerge automatically from shared mission or theological goals. Rather, trust is developed through intentional leadership practices shaped by organizational design, personal competencies, relational engagement across cultures, and leadership guided by the Holy Spirit.

The following research questions guided the research:

4. RQ1: How do the cultural backgrounds and behaviors of team members shape trust dynamics in multinational ministry teams?
5. RQ2: What personal competencies are needed from members within a multinational context to cultivate trust?
6. RQ3: What intentional practices do multinational ministry teams use to cultivate and sustain trust across cultural boundaries?

Summary of the Study and Findings

Chapter 4 identified three findings that describe how trust is cultivated within multinational ministry teams. First, trust is shaped by the cultural backgrounds and behaviors of team members, including communication patterns, expectations about time

and authority, and culturally informed expressions of honor and respect. Second, trust is cultivated through personal competencies that reflect Christian character, particularly humility, integrity, emotional and spiritual maturity, adaptability, and consistency over time. Third, trust is sustained through intentional practices that prioritize relational presence, careful listening, mutual learning, and shared spiritual rhythms.

These findings suggest that trust within multinational ministry teams is neither the product of cultural similarity nor the result of organizational design. Rather, trust emerges through the faithful integration of cultural awareness, personal formation, and intentional relational practices that are grounded in theological conviction.

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret the findings of the interviews with the existing literature on organizational trust, cross-cultural leadership competencies, and biblical theology while also considering their implications for leaders serving in multinational ministry contexts. This chapter also examines how the lived experiences of participants confirm and extend current scholarship. Particular attention is given to how trust functions as both a leadership competency and as a relational reality that shapes the unity of ministry teams.

This chapter is organized into four sections. The first section discusses the study's findings in relation to the literature and focuses on trustworthy structures, systems, and relationships. The second section explores the theological implications of trust for multinational ministry leadership teams and focuses on the themes of covenant, humility, sin, and redemption. The third section considers practical implications for ministry leaders who seek to cultivate trust across cultural boundaries. The chapter concludes by acknowledging the limitations of the study and offering recommendations for future

research as well as reflecting on the significance of trust for the mission of the global church.

Discussion of Findings

Trustworthy Structures

The findings of this study suggest that organizational structures play an influential role in shaping trust within multinational ministry teams, but they do not create trust alone. The participants consistently described that structures establish the conditions in which trust either flourished or eroded over time. These structures included formal decision-making processes, communication channels, accountability mechanisms, and patterns of authority distribution. When such structures reflected cultural awareness, humility, relational sensitivity, and shared responsibility, they were experienced as supporting trust. When they reflected cultural dominance or interpersonal distance, trust was undermined even though team members operated under a shared mission and theological alignment.

This finding supports organizational leadership literature that emphasizes the contextual power of structure in complex environments. McChrystal's distinction between complicated and complex systems is particularly relevant to multinational ministry contexts. While complicated systems can be managed through standardized processes and hierarchical control, complex systems require adaptability and "shared consciousness." As McChrystal notes, complexity emerges when interactions multiply

and outcomes become unpredictable,[164] which then requires adaptable systems rather than those that rely on rigid efficiency. Ministry teams that operate across time zones, cultures, and organizational boundaries are complex systems. Participants expressed frustration when structures that were designed primarily for efficiency failed to account for this reality. They usually resulted in miscommunication and diminished trust.

Several participants noted that structural decisions that were made from a distance, particularly when communicated through impersonal channels, often resulted in unintended relational consequences. Decisions communicated primarily through email or formal documentation were perceived as lacking relational consideration, especially when such decisions carried implications for regional teams or local staff. This example reflects the challenges identified in the literature on managing virtual teams. Runde and Flanagan observe that "In the case of virtual teams, almost all communication occurs through electronic media." This tendency becomes a problem for trust-building because "The very act of communication is frequently obstructed by the inability of team members to discern body language, tone, and other nonverbals…"[165] This challenge is intensified across time zones. In multinational ministry teams, where cultural norms around communication vary, structural distance can easily be interpreted as indifference.

Cross-cultural leadership literature further highlights how organizational structures can impede the development of trust within a team by unintentionally reinforcing cultural assumptions. Lingenfelter cautions that leaders often elevate familiar organizational structures as normative and assume that they are the only legitimate means

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[164] McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 57.

[165] Runde and Flanagan, *Conflict Competent Leader*, 246.

through which God's purposes can be accomplished when he describes one common distortion as "making our familiar structure the only structure that God can use to accomplish his purpose,"[166] which reduces the diversity of God's creation to only what is culturally familiar. The participants in this study echoed this concern by describing experiences in which organizational structures reflected the assumptions of a dominant cultural context without adapting to local realities. These imbalances did not usually arise from a specific conflict or prejudice, but they nevertheless communicated whose perspectives carried the most authority and whose concerns were secondary.

In addition, Lederleitner highlights how unexamined assumptions about processes and procedures can foster paternalism in cross-cultural ministry partnerships. She notes that leaders from more resourced contexts often assume that work will be done according to "our way,"[167] and this mindset subtly reinforces control instead of a collaborative approach. The participants described similar dynamics as they noted that trust deteriorated if structures communicated superiority rather than mutuality. In such cases, organizational processes became roadblocks to trust rather than catalysts for an aligned mission.

At the same time, the participants identified several structural features that positively contributed to trust. Transparency in the decision-making processes and consistent accountability mechanisms were often cited as actions that enhanced trust when implemented with cultural sensitivity and relational care. Structures that clarified expectations and provided visibility into decision-making helped to reduce uncertainty

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[166] Lingenfelter and Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, 64.

[167] Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, 51.

and suspicion. This was particularly true in contexts marked by geographic and cultural distance. This finding aligns with Covey's claim that trust is a function of both "character and competence"[168] and that organizational clarity, when paired with integrity, builds reliability over time.

The participants emphasized that accountability structures were most effective when they functioned as shared practices rather than ways to control. Feedback loops that invited conversation and mutual learning were highlighted as trust-building. However, accountability mechanisms that were perceived as purely disciplinary weakened trust. Lederleitner underscores this point by noting that if a culture of silence is not "crushed, the full scope of information and insight we need to make truly good decisions lies dormant,"[169] which ultimately harms the relationships and ministry effectiveness. In multinational ministry teams, where cultural norms might already discourage direct confrontation, structures that invite participation and protect a team member's voice are necessary.

The findings also suggest that trustworthy structures are characterized by adaptability rather than inflexibility. The participants described that trust increases when leaders demonstrate a willingness to consider and revise structures in response to changing circumstances or new insights. Heifetz and Linsky reinforce this perspective, noting that containing conflict or imposing order may create the appearance of progress, but such actions do not result in genuine transformation.[170] Applying this insight to

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[168] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust*, 29–30.

[169] Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, 79.

[170] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 168.

organizational structures suggests that rigid systems simply mask underlying problems instead of addressing them. The participants perceived that the structures that remained inflexible despite contextual change were disconnected from reality. However, those that adapted in response to feedback communicated humility and cultural awareness.

Theologically, these findings reflect a reality about the limits of human systems. Scripture presents trust as being grounded in the faithfulness of the God who binds Himself by covenant and never abandons His purposes. At the same time, human structures are subject to distortion due to the Fall, when mankind rebelled against his faithful God. Wolters observes that "The effects of sin touch all of creation; no created thing is in principle untouched by the corrosive effects of the fall."[171] This includes organizational structures and the people who lead them. This perspective cautions against placing undue confidence in structures themselves. Trustworthy structures are not those that promise certainty. Rather, they are those that remain open to examination in light of their purpose and in submission to God.

Together, these findings suggest that trustworthy structures are not defined by efficiency or control. Instead, they are marked by their ability to maintain cultural diversity while demonstrating humility. Structures that invite shared participation, honor cultural differences, and remain open to change create the conditions where trust can grow. In contrast, structures that prioritize efficiency or reinforce cultural dominance can undermine trust. This understanding is true even when leaders share the same theological commitments. In these diverse contexts, trust is not only shaped by what leaders believe but also by how their structures reflect their beliefs in everyday practice.

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[171] Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 53.

Trustworthy Systems

While organizational structures establish the context where trust can grow, the findings of this study show that trust within multinational ministry teams is sustained through trustworthy systems. These systems are expressed in leadership practice. The participants emphasized that trust was less associated with formal policies and more linked to the patterns of behavior that were demonstrated by leaders. These behaviors included integrity, humility, consistency, and care that developed over time. These systems included personal competencies, such as emotional maturity, self-awareness, and spiritual discernment. They also included wise decision-making habits, clear communication styles, and adaptive responses to complex situations. Together, these systems formed the environment in which trust was either reinforced or weakened.

The participants described trustworthy systems as those that revealed alignment between stated values and lived-out behaviors. Leaders who consistently followed through on commitments, communicated clearly, and acted with transparency were perceived as trustworthy. This case was true even during times of uncertainty or conflict. This finding aligns closely with Covey's claim that "trust is a function of two things: character and competence," both of which are necessary for trust to be sustained. The authors write, "Character involves your integrity, your motive, your intent with people. Competence includes your capabilities, your skills, your results, your track record."[172] The participants noted that leaders who demonstrated only one of these character dimensions were perceived as unreliable, which was particularly true in complex and cross-cultural contexts.

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[172] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust*, 29–30.

Organizational trust literature further reinforces the importance of consistency between words and actions. Covey notes that in nearly every discussion of trust, keeping commitments emerges as the most influential behavior, and what leaders do carries greater weight than what they say.[173] Participants echoed this claim by describing how trust was built over time through repeated evidence of reliability rather than through charisma or formal authority. Trustworthy systems were experienced as more than hopeful ideals—they noticeable patterns of faithfulness.

Humility emerged as a central competency within trustworthy systems. The participants described that humility is not simply situational or based on short performances. As Andrew Murray observes, "humility is not a posture we assume for a time…but the very spirit of our life…"[174] This understanding helps frame humility as a core competency that sustains trust through ongoing patterns of leadership. The participants also explained that trust grows when leaders demonstrate a learning posture and acknowledge limitations. This humble posture is particularly vital in cross-cultural contexts where assumptions carried from one cultural setting to another could easily distort understanding. Schein's work on humble leadership supports this finding, arguing that contemporary leadership increasingly depends on the ability "to orchestrate the group sensemaking process, to create the context for fully open dialogue, and to select the appropriate decision-making process."[175] The participants described leaders who built trust by listening well and asking thoughtful questions, even at the cost of efficiency. In

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[173] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust*, 132.

[174] Andrew Murray, *Humility: The Journey Toward Holiness*, with Donna Partow (Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 53.

[175] Schein and Schein, *Humble Leadership*, 103.

this way, humility functions as a leadership competency that shapes how trust is built and sustained within the team.

Trustworthy systems are also evident in how leaders respond to conflict or even failure. The participants noted that trust was tested the most when resources were limited, mistakes occurred, or issues of misalignment were encountered. Leaders who avoided difficult conversations by concealing concerns, or responding defensively, were perceived as eroding trust. However, when leaders addressed breaks of trust directly and communicated openly, trust strengthened. Trust grew even when outcomes were imperfect. Runde and Flanagan observe that when relevant concerns are hidden, trust diminishes and perceptions of commitment are questioned.[176] The participants' experiences reflected this dynamic, especially in virtual teams where miscommunication can easily occur.

The interviews also emphasized adaptability within trustworthy systems. The participants described that trust increases when leaders demonstrate flexibility in response to changing conditions instead of clinging to set plans. This emphasis aligns with the leadership literature on complexity. McChrystal argues that "adaptability, not efficiency, must become our central competency"[177] in environments characterized by uncertainty and interdependence. The participants acknowledged that leaders who recognized uncertainty and were willing to revise strategies through collaboration were perceived as more trustworthy than those who projected confidence but ignored

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[176] Runde and Flanagan, *Conflict Competent Leader*, 143.

[177] McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 20.

contextual changes. In these cases, adaptability is not considered a weakness, but a reflection of wisdom and maturity.

Accountability functioned as another essential component of trustworthy systems. The participants distinguished between accountability that either cultivated growth or reinforced control. Trust is strengthened when accountability is framed as a shared commitment to faithfulness and improvement rather than as surveillance that could lead to punishment. Lederleitner offers a theological framing that supports this finding, noting that accountability is what God designed "to enable us to learn from one another, coach each other and grow into maturity in Christ."[178]

Theologically, these findings reflect a vision of leadership that is shaped by God's creation within a fallen context. Human leaders are called to steward their leadership responsibilities, yet they do so as finite and fallen image-bearers. Perry's observation that sin alienates relationships and corrupts roles provides a helpful lens for understanding why trustworthy systems require ongoing humility and repentance. Trustworthy systems acknowledge human limitations. They do not deny them; instead they orient leadership practices toward dependence on God rather than self-sufficiency. Scripture consistently grounds trust in the character and faithfulness of God, who alone is fully trustworthy. Therefore, human leadership systems function best when they reflect God's faithfulness, even in an imperfect way. Rather than eliminating risk or failure, trustworthy systems create patterns of integrity that include repentance and renewal. As leaders align their rhythms and decisions with these realities, they will witness trust being cultivated through the ongoing faithfulness and the grace of God.

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[178] Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, 78.

Overall, the findings suggest that trustworthy systems within multinational ministry teams are characterized by humility, consistency, adaptability, and accountability, which are characteristics embodied in daily leadership practice. These systems translate organizational values into lived reality and shape how leaders communicate, make decisions, respond, and learn. In complex and culturally diverse ministry contexts where structures may be strained, these systems serve as the primary means through which trust is built and sustained.

Trustworthy Relationships

While trustworthy structures and systems establish the conditions and practices that support trust, the findings of this study show that trust within multinational ministry teams is deepened through trustworthy relationships. The participants emphasized that trust was not merely an organizational outcome. Instead, it was a relational reality formed over time through presence, listening, shared experience, and mutual vulnerability. In culturally diverse ministry contexts where misunderstanding and distance are risks, relational investment emerged as a main factor in whether trust either grew or eroded.

The participants described trustworthy relationships as those evidenced by genuine care and a willingness to engage others beyond their assigned roles. Trust deepened when leaders showed interest in the lives and perspectives of their teammates rather than limiting the interactions to task-related functions. This outward attention reflects what Tim Keller describes as gospel humility. As Keller explains, “the essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of

myself less."[179] This self-forgetful leadership style removes attention from oneself and allows the focus to shift toward others, which allows them to feel seen and valued. In multinational teams, this posture functions as a significant trust-builder across cultural differences. This insight also aligns with cross-cultural leadership literature, which emphasizes the importance of relational engagement in building trust. Meyer distinguishes between cognitive trust, based on reliability and competence, and affective trust, which develops through emotional connection and empathy.[180] The participants indicated that while cognitive trust was necessary, affective trust was essential for sustaining collaboration.

Listening emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned relational practices associated with trust. The participants noted that leaders who listened patiently and asked clarifying questions were considered trustworthy. Lederleitner emphasizes that effective cross-cultural partnership requires understanding what partners believe as well as why those beliefs and behaviors are logical within a given context.[181] The participants echoed this insight, observing that trust grew when leaders sought to understand the reasoning behind perspectives rather than reacting in a dismissive or even defensive way.

Presence also played a critical role in the formation of trustworthy relationships. The participants described that trust increases through shared face-to-face interaction and participation in one another's contexts. Although virtual communication is necessary for technical coordination, it is insufficient for deep trust formation. Kouzes and Posner note

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[179] Timothy J. Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (10Publishing, 2014), 32.

[180] Meyer, *The Culture Map*, 168.

[181] Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, 24.

that firsthand experience with another person remains a more reliable means of building identification and reducing misunderstanding than mediated interaction alone.[182] The participants affirmed that in-person visits, shared meals, informal conversations, and worshiping together created a relational depth that could not be replicated through digital communication.

Trustworthy relationships are also further strengthened through shared work and mutual dependence. The participants emphasized that trust develops through laboring together toward meaningful goals, not by forced team-building activities. Bolsinger captures this reality by arguing that the trust required to navigate uncharted territory is built through "meaningful work together"[183] rather than through shared-interest activities alone. The participants described how working together while navigating challenges cultivated respect and confidence in one another.

Vulnerability also emerged as a defining characteristic of trustworthy relationships. The participants noted that trust deepened when leaders acknowledged mistakes or uncertainty and invited help rather than pretending to know more than they actually did. Lencioni describes vulnerability-based trust as the foundation of cohesive teams, characterized by a willingness to say, "I need help" or "I was wrong."[184] The participants observed that such vulnerability indicated authenticity and humility and created space for honesty and mutual support. In multinational ministry contexts where

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[182] Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 215.

[183] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 68.

[184] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 27.

power dynamics and cultural hierarchies can discourage openness, the team members' willingness to model vulnerability has a significant impact on relational trust.

Moreover, spiritual practices play a distinctive role in the formation of trustworthy relationships within multinational ministry teams. The participants proposed that trust is strengthened through shared prayer, worship, and reflection on Scripture. These practices provide teams with a shared spiritual language that transcends cultural differences. They also help to shift relationships toward a dependence on God rather than on human competence alone. Lingenfelter argues that "Leaders who wish to create covenant communities must make worship an intentional part of the experience that people share in community…This worship experience must be communal, involving teaching, fellowship, food, and prayer."[185] The participants affirmed that such shared spiritual practices fostered humility, unity, and trust.

Theologically, the findings reflect a relational vision of trust that is grounded in covenant. Scripture consistently presents trust as being rooted in a relationship that begins with God and then extends to His people. Berkhof describes trust as an immediate consciousness of love, confidence, and reverent dependence that is prompted by the work of the Spirit, which culminates in the cry, "Abba, Father."[186] This theological understanding poses that trust within ministry teams is more than a sentiment that supports organizational effectiveness - it provides confidence within relationships that are grounded in God's faithfulness.

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[185] Lingenfelter, *Leading Cross-Culturally*, 83.

[186] Berkhof, *Assurance of Faith*, 62–63.

At the same time, the participants demonstrated a clear awareness of how fragile trust is within human relationships. The effects of sin, as Wolters observes, extend to every aspect of creation, including relational dynamics and communal life.[187] The participants acknowledged that trust could be damaged through neglect, miscommunication, unresolved conflict, or even through unaware actions. However, they also noted that trust could be restored through repentance, forgiveness, acts of reconciliation, and renewed commitment to relational practices. This realism helps to prevent naivety regarding trust and instead highlights that it must be continually cultivated and protected.

Together, the findings suggest that trustworthy relationships in multinational ministry teams are formed through intentional relational practices that prioritize presence, listening, vulnerability, shared work, and shared spiritual life. These relationships do not replace structures or systems, but they add life to them. In culturally diverse and missionally complex contexts, trustworthy relationships serve as the relational framework that sustains teamwork over time.

Theological Implications

The findings of this study reveal that trust within multinational ministry teams is not only an organizational or relational concern but also a theological reality shaped by the character of God, the nature of His covenant with His people, the condition of humanity after the Fall, and what Christian team members should aspire to in the Kingdom of God. The participants' experiences pointed beyond techniques and

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[187] Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 53–54.

competencies, and they based their answers on theological convictions that inform how trust is understood, cultivated, extended, and maintained. Based on the interviews in this study, trust reflects a lived-out theology of God's faithfulness, human limitation, restoration, and communal dependence under Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

At the foundation of Christian trust lies the covenantal faithfulness of God. Scripture presents the Lord as the One who binds Himself to His people and remains steadfast in His commitments. The Old Testament portrays God as entering into a covenant in such a way that His people may know Him as reliable and faithful in action. MacLaren describes this covenantal reality as God presenting Himself "to our trust" and binding Himself to a "known line of action."[188] This theological vision grounds trust in the dependability of God's character.

The participants' reflections resonate with this covenantal framework. The leaders frequently described trust as something that develops over time through demonstrated faithfulness. This understanding mirrors the biblical pattern in which trust grows as God's people witness His consistency throughout periods of testing, discipline, provision, and rescue. Andrew Murray's reflection on God's covenantal condescension captures this dynamic, which emphasizes that God provides confidence by accommodating Himself to human weakness and binding Himself to promises that He faithfully fulfills.[189] In this sense, trust within ministry leadership reflects the covenantal logic by which God invites His people to rest in His faithfulness rather than in their own certainty.

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[188] Alexander MacLaren, "God's Faithfulness (Deuteronomy 7:9)," accessed October 10, 2025, https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/maclaren_alexander/expositions-of-holy-scripture/deuteronomy/gods-faithfulness.cfm.

[189] Andrew Murray, "Covenant God," accessed October 10, 2025, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/murray_andrew/two/two01.cfm.

At the same time, the findings emphasize the necessity of theological realism in any discussion of trust. Scripture does not idealize human relationships or institutions, nor does it assume that shared faith eliminates the effects of sin. Wolters' articulation of the fall's extensive reach provides an important interpretive lens. The effects of sin touch every aspect of creation, including social structures, leadership systems, and communal life.[190] The participants acknowledged that trust was strained, and even broken, not only by overt wrongdoing, but by fear, pride, miscommunication, and unexamined assumptions. Perry's discussion of sin's impact on image-bearing roles further clarifies why trust remains fragile even within ministry contexts: "Sin alienates every relationship and corrupts every role,"[191] including those exercised by leaders in God's kingdom. This theological insight helps explain why trust cannot be assumed simply because leaders share theological commitments or missional goals. Trust must be cultivated with an awareness of every person's moral vulnerability. The participants' experiences suggest that leaders who acknowledge this reality are in a better position to respond to breakdowns in trust with repentance and humility rather than defensiveness or control.

Based on this context, humility emerges as a central theological implication of the study. Keller's emphasis on self-forgetfulness helps articulate the relational posture of humility in leadership as he defines gospel humility as no longer "connecting every experience, every conversation, with myself."[192] This reflects Paul's vision of humility as considering others before self. As Gordon Fee explains, "humility, therefore not self-

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[190] Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 53–54.

[191] Perry, *Drama of Discipleship*, 46.

[192] Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, 32.

focused at all, but rather, as further defined by Paul in v. 4, 'looks not to one's own concerns but to those of others.'"[193] Murray deepens this reality by framing humility as a fundamental disposition rather than a temporary stance by describing humility as "the blossom of which death to self is the perfect fruit."[194] In this sense, humility reflects an ongoing posture that is shaped through faithful dependence on God rather than a situational leadership tactic. Together, these perspectives reinforce the study's finding that humility is a multifaceted posture that motivates healthy listening, curiosity, ongoing learning, mutual accountability, and sacrificial care. This posture reflects a theological understanding of leadership as stewardship rather than power. Scripture consistently places humility as an appropriate understanding of God and self, in which one recognizes that leadership flows from dependence on God rather than confidence in one's personal competencies or positional authority.

This understanding of humility is especially significant in multinational ministry contexts, where cultural traditions can come across as theological positions. A high view of God's sovereignty affirms the diversity of cultures as part of His good design, even as it acknowledges the flaws introduced by sin. The participants' experiences reveal that trust was strengthened when leaders approached cultural difference with humility, curiosity, restraint, and, at best, appreciation, rather than with an impulse to criticize or dominate. This approach helps leaders reject the idea that ministry effectiveness is tied to cultural uniformity. It also reflects a theology that honors the Imago Dei in all people.

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[193] Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians Commentary*, 118.

[194] Murray, *Humility*, 83.

The findings also highlight the theological significance of accountability within trusting relationships. Instead of accountability being perceived as a tool of control, it emerged as a shared commitment to faithfulness before God. This understanding aligns with a biblical vision of accountability rooted in covenant. Leaders who practice healthy accountability reflect a theology where God's people display responsibility under his authority.

Finally, the findings indicate that the work of the Holy Spirit is essential to sustaining trust within ministry teams. The participants described that trust is often exceeded by organizational design or relational effort. Shared prayer and worship functioned as formative practices that orient relationships toward God's presence and purposes. Berkhof's description of trust as an "immediate consciousness of love to God, of trust and confidence in him,"[195] prompted by the Spirit's work, helps illuminate this dynamic. Trust within ministry teams is strengthened when leaders and teams consciously place their confidence in God's ongoing faithfulness instead of systems or personalities.

The Book of Acts provides a theological framework for understanding trust within culturally diverse ministry contexts. The early church functioned as a multinational community navigating real tensions that were related to culture, leadership, and resource distribution. Trust was cultivated through shared practices such as fellowship (Acts 2:42-47), generosity (Acts 4:32-37), and Spirit-led conflict resolution (Acts 6:1-7). Additionally, trust was restored and extended through relational advocacy, as seen in Barnabas's acceptance of Saul (Acts 9:26-31), and sustained through culturally sensitive decision-making, as demonstrated at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-35). These

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[195] Berkhof, *Assurance of Faith*, 62–63.

episodes show that trust cultivated within God's people comes through humility, shared life, wise leadership, and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

These theological implications suggest that trust in multinational ministry leadership is best understood as a covenantal reality that is sustained by God's faithfulness, shaped by humility, and exercised within the limits of human fallenness. Trust is not automatic. It must be continually nurtured through practices that reflect theological truth. When leaders anchor their approach in a deep understanding of God's reliability, covenant, the effects of sin, and dependence on the Spirit, trust becomes a faithful expression of life together under Christ.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for team members of multinational ministries. While trust cannot be reduced to technique or policy, the participants suggested that leaders can intentionally cultivate environments in which trust is more likely to develop and flourish. These implications should not be understood as prescriptive formulas. Rather, they are constructive suggestions that can shape the leadership posture of team members. They should influence relational engagement and the ways in which members of an organization function across cultural contexts.

First, leaders should cultivate humility as the foundation of their leadership posture. Across regions and ministry contexts, humility emerged as the most consistent and influential contributor to trust. The participants described that trust increases when leaders demonstrate teachability and acknowledge their limitations as well as when team members remain open to correction. Practically, this approach requires leaders to resist the impulse to lead from assumed expertise or cultural supremacy. Asking genuine

questions with a willingness to listen to diverse perspectives and learning from others with local knowledge communicates respect and fosters relational safety. In multinational ministry teams, humility functions as a necessary condition for trust to develop.

Second, team members should integrate spiritual practices as trust-forming rhythms rather than secondary activities. The participants consistently described praying together, worship, and reflection on Scripture as practices that orient relationships toward God's faithfulness and foster unity across cultural differences. Leaders who treat spiritual practices as communal rhythms instead of an agenda item create space for deeper trust to grow. In practice, leaders should embed contextually sensitive spiritual practices within the fabric of the organization, and these practices must be connected to the lived realities of the team.

Third, leaders should prioritize relational presence alongside operational realities. While technology enables collaboration across different time zones, the participants affirmed that trust is deepen most significantly through real-life shared experiences and informal interaction. Face-to-face encounters, shared meals, and participation in local contexts communicate care that cannot be digitally replicated. Even when physical presence is limited, leaders who create space for personal sharing and focused times of listening within virtual settings allow deeper relationships to be cultivated. Trust grew where leaders were present rather than merely in cases where they were efficient.

Fourth, team members should recognize that trust is sustained through consistent leadership practice rather than sporadic leadership gestures. The participants emphasized that trust develops gradually through repeated experiences of integrity and follow-through. Leaders who honor commitments and act consistently are perceived as

trustworthy. This finding suggests that leaders should carefully attend to everyday practices, realizing that consistency, more than charisma, plays a central role in sustaining trust.

Fifth, leaders should approach organizational design with an awareness that structures communicate values. The participants described trust is shaped by the ways that decisions are made and communicated. In multinational contexts, leaders should therefore consider whether existing structures reflect a single cultural point of view or allow space for diverse perspectives to be heard. This practice may require consultation and more clarity about how authority is exercised. It might also require a willingness to adapt processes across regions. Structures that encourage participation and openness are experienced as more trust-building than those that rely primarily on efficiency or control.

Sixth, leaders should address conflict both directly and relationally. The participants noted that trust is rarely damaged beyond repair due to mistakes. However, avoidance or defensiveness following those mistakes causes the most damage. Leaders who acknowledge tensions and invite conversation are more likely to restore trust than those who seek to preserve harmony through silence. Practically, this approach requires leaders to develop the capacity to receive critiques well and to engage in difficult conversations with grace. Addressing conflict in a healthy manner communicates respect and long-term commitment to the relationship.

Seventh, accountability should be framed as a shared practice. The participants highlighted that they value accountability systems that clarify expectations and encourage learning. They resist systems that are perceived as surveillance or pressure. Leaders can foster trust by ensuring accountability mechanisms are transparent, relational, reciprocal,

and aligned with the mission. Inviting feedback on leadership decisions and emphasizing that accountability is mutual strengthens trust and reinforces shared responsibility.

Finally, leaders should adopt a long-term perspective on cultivating trust. The participants emphasized that trust develops slowly and can be easily damaged through neglect or inconsistency. Leaders who approach trust as something to be established often quickly grow impatient or discouraged, whereas those who view trust as a long-term process demonstrate greater perseverance. In practice, leadership requires patience and a willingness to remain engaged even when progress feels slow and frustrating. Trustworthy leadership, as reflected in this study, is not marked by rapid results but by sustained faithfulness over time.

When these practical implications are considered together, they suggest that trust in multinational ministry leadership is cultivated through intentional alignment between leadership posture, relational presence, organizational practice, and spiritual formation. Leaders who carefully commit to these dimensions create environments in which trust can grow. In doing so, they enhance organizational effectiveness and also bear witness to a form of leadership shaped by life together in union with Christ.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several directions for future research that could deepen the understanding of trust within multinational ministry teams. While this study offers insight into how trust is cultivated and sustained among executive-level leaders, additional research could broaden the scope and explore related dynamics in greater depth. First, future studies could examine trust formation from the perspective of team members at different organizational levels. Feedback from staff, regional leaders,

volunteers, and local partners should be included to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how trust is experienced across hierarchical and cultural boundaries. Such research could also explore whether trust is perceived differently by those in non-executive leadership roles.

Second, comparative studies across different types of ministry organizations could yield valuable insight. This study focused on leaders serving in multinational ministry contexts with shared missional commitments. Future research might examine trust dynamics in organizations with different structures, denominational affiliations, funding models, or theological emphases. Comparing these contexts could help clarify how organizational culture and theological orientation influence trust-building practices.

Third, research conducted over an extended period could offer deeper insight into how trust develops, erodes, and is restored. Trust is dynamic, and participants in this study emphasized its gradual formation. Following teams over extended periods could illuminate how trust responds to leadership transitions, conflict, organizational change, or external crises. Such studies would be particularly valuable in capturing the rhythms of trust across seasons of stability and disruption.

Fourth, future research could explore trust dynamics in both culturally specific and regionally focused contexts. While this study involved leaders working across multiple regions, more focused studies within specific cultural settings could provide greater nuance regarding how cultural values shape the expectations of all the dynamics that build and break trust. These insights could inform more contextually grounded leadership development and training.

Fifth, additional research could specifically examine the role of spiritual practices in trust formation. Participants in this study identified acts of shared prayer and worship as trust builders, yet these dynamics remain underexplored in organizational leadership literature. Future studies might investigate how particular practices shape relational trust as well as the related outcomes for ministry teams.

Finally, future research could integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore trust more holistically. While qualitative methods are well-suited for capturing lived experiences and meaning, quantitative studies that are correlated could examine patterns or outcomes that are related to trust in larger samples. Such mixed-methods approaches could strengthen the field's understanding of trust while remaining attentive to its relational and theological dimensions.

These directions for future research suggest that trust within multinational ministry leadership remains a rich and important area for continued study. By building on the insights of this study, future research can further clarify how trust functions across cultures and organizations in service of the global church.

Conclusion

This study explores how trust is cultivated and sustained among leaders serving on multinational ministry teams through qualitative interviews with executive-level leaders who are operating across various cultural, theological, linguistic, and organizational boundaries. The research examines the lived dynamics of trust within multiple complex ministry environments. The findings reveal that trust is neither secondary nor automatic within multinational ministry contexts. Rather, trust emerges through intentional leadership practices shaped by healthy organizational structures,

personal systems, and relational engagement. These aspects are all informed by theological conviction.

In all of the interviews, three interrelated findings consistently emerged. First, trust is shaped by organizational structures that communicate values and distribute authority. These structures also establish patterns of participation and accountability that influence how trust develops over time. Structures that honor cultural differences and remain adaptable are considered to be trust-supporting, while rigid or culturally dominant structures often undermine trust. Second, trust is sustained through leadership systems that are embodied in daily practice. More than simply desirable traits, humility, consistency, adaptability, and accountability are essential qualities that strengthen trust over time. Third, trust is deepened through relationships marked by presence, attentive listening, vulnerability, shared work, and shared spiritual life. In multinational ministry teams, intentional investment in relationships functions as the relational framework that nurtures collaboration.

Together, these findings indicate that trust within multinational ministry leadership cannot be reduced to technique and charismatic personality nor can it be built by shared mission alone. Trust develops as a formative reality over time, and it is influenced by organizational design, daily and ongoing leadership practice, and the quality of relationships formed across cultural differences. The study further demonstrates that trust must be understood theologically and grounded in the covenantal faithfulness of God, in the context of human limitation, and shaped by humility and sustained through dependence on the Holy Spirit.

The theological implications of the study underscore that trust is both a gift and a responsibility. Although God's reliability provides the ultimate ground for trust, human trust remains fragile due to the effects of sin on relationships and institutions. As a result, trust within ministry teams must be continually cultivated through practices of humility, repentance, accountability, and grace. Leaders who acknowledge these theological realities are better equipped to steward trust faithfully.

The practical implications of this study offer guidance for leaders navigating the challenges of multinational ministry. Trust is fostered when leaders lead with humility, prioritize relational presence, integrate spiritual practices into communal life, design structures attentively, address conflict openly, and commit to long-term faithfulness. These practices do not eliminate risk or guarantee unity, but they help create environments in which trust can grow.

While the study has limitations related to sample size, scope, and perspective, it contributes meaningful insight into the lived experience of trust among multinational ministry leaders. It also points toward research that can further explore trust across organizational levels, theological leanings, cultural contexts, and various seasons of ministry life. In a time marked by globalization and complexity, the need for trustworthy leadership within the global church is great. Multinational ministry teams operate at the intersection of culture, theology, languages, and organizational life, and in such contexts, trust is continually tested. This study affirms that trust is not sustained through control or the charisma of a single leader but through faithful team leadership grounded in humility, relational presence, dependence on God, and the work of the Spirit. When trust is

stewarded in this way, multinational ministry teams are better equipped to reflect the unity of the body of Christ and to bear faithful witness to the gospel they proclaim.

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