

Effectiveness of Congregational Hierarchy on Decision Making in the United Church of Zambia: A Case of Lusaka District

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of the hierarchical structure of the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) in influencing decision-making, particularly at the local congregational level in Lusaka District. The primary objective was to assess how leadership interactions among the General Assembly, Synod, and local congregations affect decision-making efficiency, with emphasis on the mediating role of Responsiveness to Local Needs (RLN). A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data from 170 structured questionnaires (85% response rate) with qualitative insights from 20 semi-structured interviews. Stratified random and purposive sampling ensured representation across all hierarchical levels. The findings revealed that RLN was the strongest predictor of decision-making efficiency, followed by Local Congregational Leadership (LCL), General Assembly Leadership (GAL), and Synod Leadership (SYL). These results underscore the importance of flexibility, communication clarity, and local adaptability in implementing higher-level decisions. While upper leadership provides strategic direction, its practical application often lacks contextual relevance, particularly in urban congregations. The study recommends decentralizing some decision-making functions, strengthening communication channels, and enhancing support for local leaders through training and resources. In conclusion, although hierarchical leadership promotes unity, empowering local leaders to tailor decisions to community needs significantly improves operational effectiveness. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of decentralization and to compare governance models across religious organizations.

Keywords: Hierarchical Structure, Decision-Making Efficiency, Responsiveness to Local Needs, United Church of Zambia, Local Congregational Leadership

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1. Introduction

The structure of leadership within religious organizations has historically played a critical role in determining their operational success, especially in shaping governance and decision-making (Northouse, 2022; Chirwa, 2019). In the Zambian context, the United Church of Zambia (UCZ)—a major Protestant denomination—presents a unique case study of how leadership frameworks evolve over time. The UCZ was founded in 1965 through the union of several Christian traditions, including the Baptist, Congregational, and Reformed churches. This historic merger created a broad-based and diverse leadership model intended to unify varying theological and administrative practices under one institutional umbrella (Chirwa, 2019).

The post-merger years were marked by the consolidation of this hierarchical structure, with clear delineations of authority. The UCZ adopted a multi-tiered leadership model comprising the General Assembly at the apex, followed by regional Synods, and local congregations at the grassroots (Chirwa, 2019). The General Assembly serves as the supreme governing body responsible for setting the church's doctrinal direction and high-level policies (Mumba, 2018). Synods coordinate regional affairs, while congregational ministers oversee day-to-day spiritual and administrative functions within local communities (Nkhoma, 2021). This structure was historically designed to promote unity, consistency in governance, and effective decision-making across a national church body (Chirwa, 2019; Mumba, 2018).

As Zambia's political, economic, and social environment evolved—particularly in the wake of liberalization and urbanization in the late 20th century—the UCZ began facing new pressures. The increasing complexity of congregational needs, combined with persistent challenges such as poverty, inequality, and community fragmentation, required leadership that could be both stable and adaptable (Mumba, 2018). In particular, urban areas like Lusaka saw a growing demand for leadership that was context-sensitive and responsive to rapidly changing local realities. In practice, however, decision-making within the UCZ has remained largely centralized, with significant authority retained at the General Assembly and Synod levels. While this centralization was initially intended to safeguard doctrinal integrity and organizational cohesion, it has increasingly drawn criticism for its potential to hinder local responsiveness. Churches in dynamic urban environments often encounter delays in decision-making and challenges in tailoring ministry approaches to the specific needs of their congregations (Nkhoma, 2021).

Internal data from UCZ administrative units support these concerns. For example, the Lusaka Presbytery's 2020 internal report noted that over 60% of development proposals from local congregations were delayed by more than six months due to procedural reviews at Synod and Assembly levels. In a separate 2021 survey conducted by the UCZ Church Development Department, 72% of local church leaders in Lusaka District reported feeling excluded from strategic decisions affecting their ministries. Furthermore, minutes from the 2022 Synod Planning Meeting highlighted formal complaints from at least three congregations in urban Lusaka regarding slow communication, procedural rigidity, and inadequate autonomy in responding to community-specific challenges.

These trends reinforce the perception that while the hierarchical model supports structural consistency, it may be misaligned with the operational realities and expectations of local congregations—particularly in fast-changing, socio-economically diverse urban settings. Furthermore, despite the acknowledged importance of leadership structures in religious organizations, there is limited empirical research examining how the UCZ's hierarchical system functions in contemporary Zambia (Mumba, 2018; Chirwa, 2019). As the nation continues to grapple with rapid urbanization, economic uncertainty, and shifting congregational expectations, questions have emerged about whether the UCZ's current model adequately supports timely and inclusive decision-making at the local level (Nkhoma, 2021). Thus, from its historical foundation rooted in ecumenical unity to its current position navigating complex societal demands, the UCZ faces ongoing challenges in aligning its hierarchical leadership model with the operational realities of the 21st century. This evolving context highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how the existing structure influences the church's governance and decision-making capacity, especially within socio-economically diverse districts such as Lusaka.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is the effectiveness of the hierarchical structure of the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) in facilitating decision-making, particularly at the local congregational level in Lusaka District. While the UCZ's multi-layered leadership structure—comprising the General Assembly, Synods, and congregational ministers—was designed to ensure doctrinal unity and consistent governance, its practical implications for timely and inclusive decision-making at the grassroots level remain under-examined. Centralization of authority at the higher echelons, such as the General Assembly and Synods, often leads to delays in decision implementation and limited responsiveness to local church needs, especially in dynamic urban environments like Lusaka (Mumba, 2018; Nkhoma, 2021).

Empirical indications of these challenges are increasingly evident. For example, internal reports from the Lusaka Presbytery (2020) highlight that over 60% of project proposals from local congregations in the last three years experienced delays of six months or more due to protracted approval processes at the Synod level. Similarly, a 2021 ministerial survey by the UCZ Church Development Department revealed that 72% of congregational leaders in Lusaka District felt excluded from strategic decision-making processes, citing hierarchical bottlenecks as a primary constraint. Additionally, minutes from the 2022 Lusaka Synod Planning Meeting reflect complaints from three urban congregations about inadequate feedback loops and a lack of autonomy in executing community-based initiatives.

Such patterns point to a structural gap where the hierarchical model, although theoretically sound, may inadvertently hinder timely action and local innovation. Research by Nkhoma (2021) suggests that over-centralized systems in religious institutions lead to operational inefficiencies and disempower local leaders who are best positioned to address contextual realities. Furthermore, Khan and Zada (2020) emphasize that decentralization and participatory governance in faith-based organizations significantly enhance community engagement and organizational responsiveness.

Despite growing recognition of these issues, there is a notable lack of empirical research on how the UCZ's hierarchical leadership structure impacts actual decision-making outcomes at the congregational level. Much of the existing literature discusses leadership models in conceptual terms but fails to assess how top-level decisions are implemented locally or whether the structure accommodates the unique socio-economic dynamics of urban congregations such as those in Lusaka (Chirwa, 2019; Mumba, 2018). This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by examining the effectiveness of the UCZ's

hierarchical structure in shaping decision-making practices at the local level in Lusaka District, contributing to a more evidence-based understanding of religious governance and informing potential reforms in church leadership structures. This study addressed the following key objectives; (i) to assess how the hierarchical structure of the UCZ influences decision-making processes at the local congregational level in Lusaka District.; (ii) to evaluate the role of the General Assembly and Synod leadership in decision-making and their effectiveness in addressing the local needs in Lusaka District (iii) identify and analyse the challenges faced by local congregational leaders in applying decisions made by higher levels of the UCZ hierarchy within Lusaka District. To achieve the objectives, the following were key questions; (i) how does the hierarchical structure of the UCZ influence decision-making processes at the local congregational level in Lusaka District? (ii) what role do the General Assembly and Synod leadership play in decision-making, and how effective are they in addressing local needs in Lusaka District? and (iii) what challenges do local congregational leaders face in implementing decisions made by higher levels of the UCZ hierarchy in Lusaka District?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Hierarchical Structures and Local Decision-Making in Religious Organizations

Hierarchical structures in religious organizations like the UCZ provide administrative order and theological uniformity but often struggle with adaptability and inclusiveness in decision-making, especially in diverse African contexts. While such models help maintain consistency across vast regions, they can marginalize local leaders who better understand their communities' socio-cultural dynamics. Studies by Omenyo (2019) and Chitando & Biri (2021) show that centralization restricts local autonomy, hindering timely and context-relevant decisions. In Zambia, Mumba (2018) noted that UCZ's General Assembly and Synods dominate decision-making, leaving congregational leaders with limited discretion, a situation confirmed by the Church Development Department (2021), which found that 72% of local leaders felt excluded from strategic processes. This disconnect weakens implementation, trust, and innovation at the grassroots level. Therefore, while hierarchical coherence is valuable, it must be balanced with localized decision-making authority to enhance operational relevance and leadership development in changing socio-religious environments.

2.2 The Role of the General Assembly and Synods in Strategic Leadership

The UCZ's General Assembly and Synods serve as central governance bodies, offering doctrinal oversight and strategic direction. However, their top-down leadership approach has come under scrutiny for its disconnect from local church realities, especially in urban areas. Scholars like Northouse (2022) and Kanyanta & Chewe (2022) argue that responsiveness, not just authority, is vital for leadership effectiveness. In Lusaka, procedural delays in project approvals—as noted in the 2020 Presbytery Report—illustrate bureaucratic bottlenecks that erode local morale and slow community engagement. Kouzes and Posner (2019) stress the importance of combining centralized vision with decentralized implementation, yet UCZ's current model lacks adequate feedback loops and participatory structures. To remain agile and effective, the UCZ must evolve its leadership strategy by decentralizing authority, streamlining processes, and integrating local input, thereby aligning its strategic goals with ground-level realities in a rapidly urbanizing Zambia.

2.3 Challenges in Implementing Hierarchical Decisions at the Local Level

Local church leaders in the UCZ are key to translating institutional goals into community impact, yet they often lack the authority and resources to do so effectively under a rigid hierarchical system. Gathogo (2020) and Nkhoma (2021) highlight how delayed communication, insufficient autonomy, and procedural rigidity hinder contextual responsiveness, particularly in dynamic urban congregations like Lusaka. The 2022 UCZ Synod Minutes document complaints from congregations about the impracticality of top-down policies and the absence of local consultation. Scholars like Amanze (2021) emphasize the need for contextual leadership, advocating for delegated authority in program design, budgeting, and outreach. Without local adaptability, even well-intentioned policies risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative. To address these gaps, the UCZ must implement structural reforms—such as inclusive planning, decentralized governance, and active feedback mechanisms—ensuring its leadership remains relevant and responsive to Zambia's evolving socio-economic landscape.

2.4 Empirical Review

Khan and Zada (2020) examined the impact of hierarchical leadership on organizational performance, particularly in religious organizations, using a mixed-methods approach that included surveys and interviews with 150 religious leaders from various faith-based organizations. They found that while hierarchical structures help maintain doctrinal consistency, they can inhibit local responsiveness. Centralized decision-making, though providing consistency, reduced the flexibility of organizations in adapting to local needs, particularly in urban areas. The study highlighted the need for decentralization but did not delve into the specific challenges faced by urban religious organizations, which this study addresses.

Dion and Roy (2019) explored the effectiveness of hierarchical leadership in global religious organizations. They used a qualitative research design involving in-depth interviews with 120 senior religious leaders across multiple Christian denominations. Their findings indicated that centralized systems often struggled to address local cultural and socio-economic contexts effectively, leading to delays in responding to local needs. While the study emphasized the limitations

of centralization, it did not explore how such systems function in fast-growing urban centers, a gap this study seeks to fill. Jones and Brown (2021) investigated church governance structures and their impact on decision-making, especially in relation to social issues. They employed a case study approach, surveying 200 church leaders from 20 countries. Their study revealed that centralized governance systems resulted in slower responses to local social issues like poverty and inequality, while decentralized systems were more responsive but faced challenges in maintaining consistency across regions. This study did not focus on urban religious organizations in sub-Saharan Africa, where the socio-economic challenges are more acute, particularly in large cities like Lusaka.

Taylor and Williams (2018) explored the influence of hierarchical structures on church decision-making, particularly in response to social issues. A mixed-methods approach was used, surveying 200 church leaders and conducting 30 interviews across various denominations. They concluded that centralized decision-making slowed the church's response to social issues such as urban poverty and inequality. However, decentralized systems allowed for more local engagement. The study did not focus on urban centers facing rapid growth and socio-economic pressures, which is a key context in the Zambian setting.

Smith and Rogers (2020) examined the role of hierarchical governance in religious organizations, focusing on decision-making and local needs, with a sample of 180 church leaders and 30 administrators. They found that local leaders often had limited decision-making power, and centralized governance restricted the church's ability to respond to urgent community issues. The study suggested the need for more local autonomy but did not explore the impact of urbanization on church governance, a key factor in this study.

Munyoro and Nyathi (2020) investigated the impact of hierarchical church structures on decision-making in African religious organizations. They used a qualitative design, conducting focus group discussions and interviews with 50 participants from various African religious organizations. Their findings highlighted those centralized structures hindered local responses to urgent social issues, especially in rural areas. However, the study did not explore the challenges posed by urbanization and the unique governance needs of large cities like Lusaka.

Moyo and Dlamini (2021) assessed church governance and decision-making processes in African churches, focusing on their responsiveness to local needs. Using a case study approach, they surveyed 10 churches in Southern Africa, interviewing 120 participants. They found that hierarchical structures in these churches led to ineffective responses to local issues like health and education in urban areas. The study suggested decentralization but did not examine urban congregations in rapidly expanding cities such as Lusaka.

Nkosi and Khumalo (2019) explored the impact of church governance on decision-making in South African Christian communities, with a focus on urban poverty. The mixed-methods approach involved surveys of 200 church leaders and 30 interviews with local ministers. They found that centralized systems in South African churches slowed responses to urban poverty and other social issues, while decentralized models allowed for quicker local action but with inconsistencies across regions. However, the study did not address the complexities of urban governance in Zambia.

Banda and Chirwa (2020) focused on governance models in Zambian churches and how they influenced local congregational engagement and social service delivery. They used a qualitative methodology with 50 church leaders and 100 congregation members. Their research concluded that the hierarchical governance model of the UCZ impeded local engagement in social services like healthcare and education. While valuable, the study did not address the challenges posed by urbanization and the unique needs of Lusaka's urban context.

Mwansa and Mumba (2018) assessed hierarchical leadership in Zambian churches, focusing on its impact on decision-making and local needs. They employed a quantitative research design with 250 survey respondents. Their findings revealed that the UCZ's centralized decision-making structure hindered the ability of local leaders to address socio-economic challenges in a timely manner. However, the study did not examine in depth the socio-political factors influencing decision-making in rapidly urbanizing cities like Lusaka.

Chirwa (2019) explored the impact of hierarchical governance on decision-making within the UCZ, using a case study approach with 100 church leaders and 50 local congregational members. The study found that the hierarchical structure of the UCZ led to delays in addressing local needs, particularly in urban areas like Lusaka. However, the study did not explore the socio-political factors influencing decision-making in urban settings, which this study addresses.

Mumba (2018) examined the relationship between hierarchical governance and church effectiveness in Zambia, particularly in decision-making processes. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study surveyed 150 church leaders and conducted 30 in-depth interviews. The research revealed that hierarchical systems improved doctrinal unity but reduced flexibility in addressing local needs. The study emphasized the need for flexibility but did not focus specifically on the urban challenges faced by churches in Lusaka.

Nkhoma (2021) assessed the challenges of balancing hierarchical governance and local responsiveness in Zambian churches, particularly the UCZ. The study used a qualitative approach, interviewing 40 UCZ leaders and observing church meetings in Lusaka. The findings showed that centralized decision-making impeded local leaders' ability to address urgent socio-economic challenges. The study did not sufficiently explore the effects of urban migration on governance structures, which is crucial in the context of Lusaka's urbanization.

Kunda and Phiri (2020) examined decision-making in Zambian churches, focusing on the UCZ's hierarchical structure and its impact on local congregational needs. They used a quantitative approach, surveying 200 church members and leaders across Zambia. The study found that the UCZ's centralized decision-making delayed responses to critical local issues, such as healthcare and education. However, the research did not explore how urban growth impacts church

leadership and governance models in rapidly expanding cities like Lusaka.

Nawena and Silwamba (2019) explored decision-making processes in the UCZ, particularly at the local congregational level. The mixed-methods study surveyed 100 UCZ leaders and 50 congregation members. They found that centralized decision-making hindered local engagement in addressing social issues in urban centers like Lusaka. The study emphasized the need for local autonomy but did not delve into specific governance adjustments necessary for urban congregations facing unique challenges.

2.5 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is primarily underpinned by Max Weber's Bureaucratic Theory, which provides a foundational understanding of the hierarchical structure within organizations. Weber's Bureaucratic Theory (Weber, 1922) emphasizes the importance of a formalized, hierarchical structure where authority is clearly defined, and decisions are made through standardized rules and procedures. According to Weber, such a system ensures efficiency, consistency, and rationality within an organization. In the context of the UCZ, this theory is relevant as it helps explain how the church's leadership structure—comprising the General Assembly, Synods, and local congregations—organizes decision-making and maintains doctrinal unity and consistency. Weber's framework suggests that centralized decision-making within the UCZ's hierarchy should ideally ensure a uniform approach to governance and operational management across the church. However, the theory also implies that while centralized structures promote unity and order, they might restrict flexibility and responsiveness, particularly when dealing with local congregational needs. This theoretical perspective helps understand both the strengths and potential limitations of the UCZ's hierarchical system, particularly in urban centers like Lusaka, where socio-economic conditions may demand more adaptive decision-making practices.

The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in the Garbage Can Model of Decision-Making by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972), which views organizational decision-making as a fluid and often disorderly process shaped by the convergence of problems, solutions, participants, and opportunities. This model was particularly useful for analyzing the United Church of Zambia (UCZ), a complex religious institution where decision-making is influenced by hierarchy, individual roles, and internal politics. Unlike the structured and rule-based approach of Weber's Bureaucratic Theory, which assumes rational, linear decision-making, the Garbage Can Model captures the reality that decisions in organizations like the UCZ can be reactive, uncoordinated, and contextually driven. In practice, the UCZ's leadership, including the General Assembly and Synod, often faced challenges in implementing decisions that adequately addressed the specific needs of local congregations, revealing gaps between centralized planning and grassroots execution. By integrating both Weber's theory and the Garbage Can Model, the study offered a nuanced perspective on the UCZ's governance—acknowledging the formal mechanisms that guide decision-making while also exploring the informal, situational factors that complicate it. This dual-theoretical lens enabled a comprehensive understanding of how hierarchical structures within the UCZ influence decision-making across levels, particularly in the dynamic urban context of Lusaka, where socio-economic diversity intensifies governance challenges.

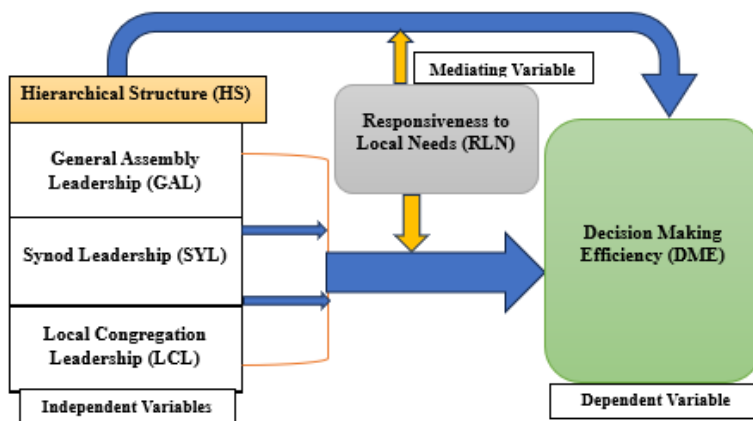


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Study (Source; Author's Compilation, 2025)

3 Research Methodology

This study employed a pragmatic research philosophy to address the real-world complexity of hierarchical governance within the United Church of Zambia (UCZ). Pragmatism, valuing practical solutions over rigid epistemological stances, enabled the researcher to combine objective measurement with subjective experience by employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. This philosophical choice was particularly useful for examining the UCZ's decision-making practices, where institutional structures intersect with individual perspectives. Accordingly, the research adopted a mixed-methods approach, allowing for the integration of broad statistical patterns with rich contextual narratives. Quantitative data were

gathered via structured questionnaires distributed to 200 church leaders at various levels (General Assembly, Synod, and Local Congregations), with 170 valid responses analyzed. Qualitative data were obtained from 20 semi-structured interviews with purposively selected leaders, offering nuanced insights into leadership perceptions and implementation challenges.

The research design followed a convergent parallel mixed-methods framework, facilitating simultaneous collection and analysis of both data types. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to examine frequencies, relationships, and predictive patterns through chi-square tests and regression analysis, while qualitative data were coded and thematically analyzed in NVivo. This dual-track strategy ensured methodological triangulation and strengthened the study's validity and reliability. The study population included 500 eligible leaders across Lusaka District, with the sample size ($n=200$) determined via Cochran's formula and adjusted for feasibility. Stratified random sampling was applied to the survey component to ensure representation across governance tiers, while purposive sampling ensured in-depth qualitative participation from decision-makers at all levels.

Data collection instruments included structured surveys with Likert-scale questions assessing clarity, efficiency, and responsiveness, alongside semi-structured interview guides addressing hierarchical dynamics and lived experiences. Validity was reinforced through alignment with theoretical constructs (e.g., Weber's Bureaucratic Theory, Garbage Can Model), expert reviews, and a pilot test. Reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's alpha (0.82) and test-retest consistency, with qualitative coding validated through inter-rater agreement (Cohen's Kappa = 0.79). Data preparation involved cleaning and coding survey responses, while thematic analysis of interviews identified key patterns. Integration of both strands occurred during interpretation, enabling comprehensive conclusions.

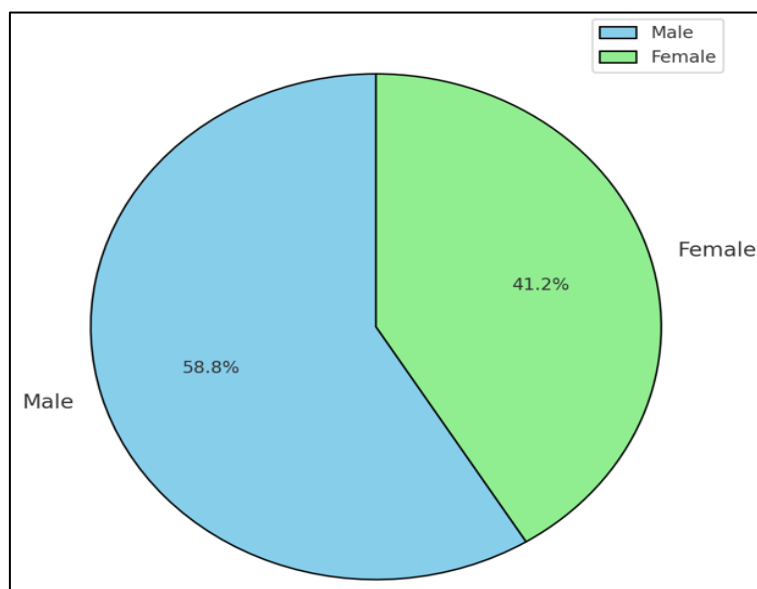
Ethical clearance was secured from the University of Zambia IRB, and all participants provided informed consent. Data confidentiality and participant autonomy were rigorously maintained through anonymization and secure data handling. Overall, the methodology was robust, ethically sound, and well-aligned with the study's objectives to assess the effectiveness of the UCZ's hierarchical structure in facilitating efficient and contextually responsive decision-making.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Gender Distribution

The pie chart in Figure 2 shows that Male participants comprised approximately 59% of the study sample, while Female participants accounted for about 41%. This distribution indicates a gender imbalance in leadership representation within the UCZ, with men forming the majority of those involved in hierarchical decision-making processes. The higher proportion of male participants may reflect existing gender dynamics in church leadership structures, where men are more likely to hold influential roles, potentially shaping the perspectives and experiences captured in the study.



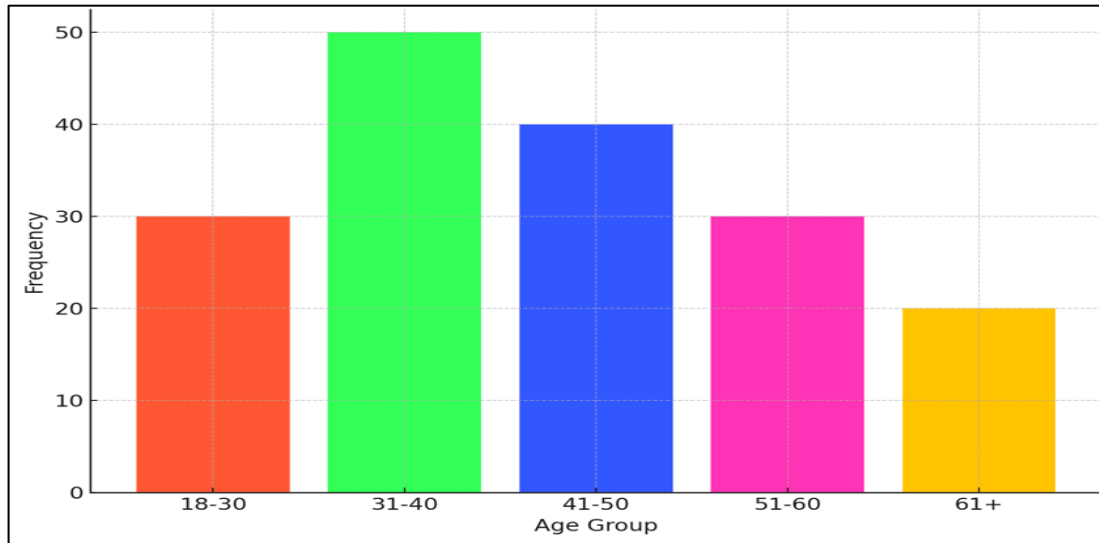
Source: Author's compilation from Field Data, 2025

Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Participants

Age Group Distribution of Participants

The histogram in Figure 3 shows a higher concentration of participants in the 31–40 and 41–50 age groups, indicating that a substantial portion of UCZ's leadership is within these middle-aged brackets. The 18–30 age group is less represented in the sample. This age distribution suggests that leadership roles within the UCZ are predominantly held by

middle-aged individuals, which may reflect an institutional preference for individuals with greater experience and tenure in decision-making positions.



Source: Author’s compilation from Field Data, 2025

Figure 3: Age Group Distribution of Participants

Position in UCZ Distribution of Participants

The bar chart in Figure 4 shows that the majority of participants were from the Local Congregation level (approximately 35%), followed by General Assembly and Synod leaders. This distribution indicates that a significant portion of the data reflects the views of those at the implementation level of the hierarchy. The concentration of responses from local leaders provides critical insight into how decisions made at higher levels are operationalized, offering a basis to evaluate the effectiveness and practicality of hierarchical decision-making within the UCZ.

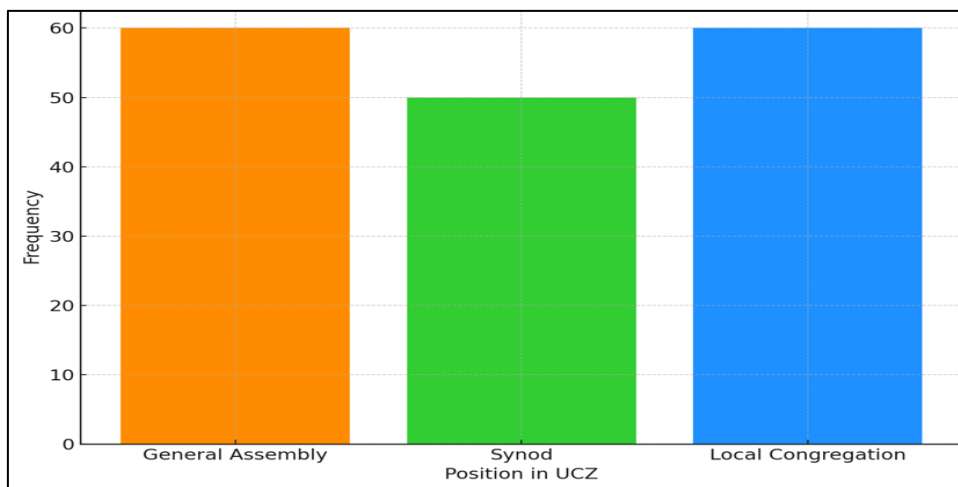


Figure 4: Position in UCZ Distribution of Participants

Source: Author’s compilation from Field Data, 2025

Years of Service Distribution of Participants

The histogram in Figure 5 shows that the majority of participants had between 6-10 years of service, followed by those with 1-5 years and 11-20 years. This suggests a moderately experienced sample with balanced representation across different stages of leadership. The varied tenure offers diverse institutional perspectives, enabling analysis of how decision-making is perceived and implemented across levels of experience within the UCZ. This diversity strengthens the credibility of the findings on leadership effectiveness and organizational responsiveness.

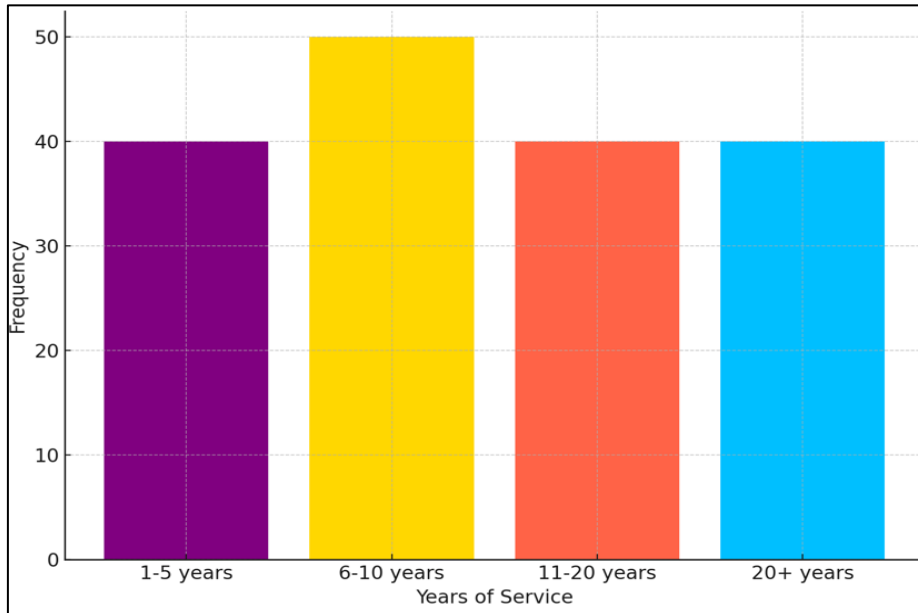


Figure 5: Years of Service Distribution of Participants
 Source: Author’s compilation from Field Data, 2025

4.2 Hierarchical Structure’s Impact on General Decision-Making Process

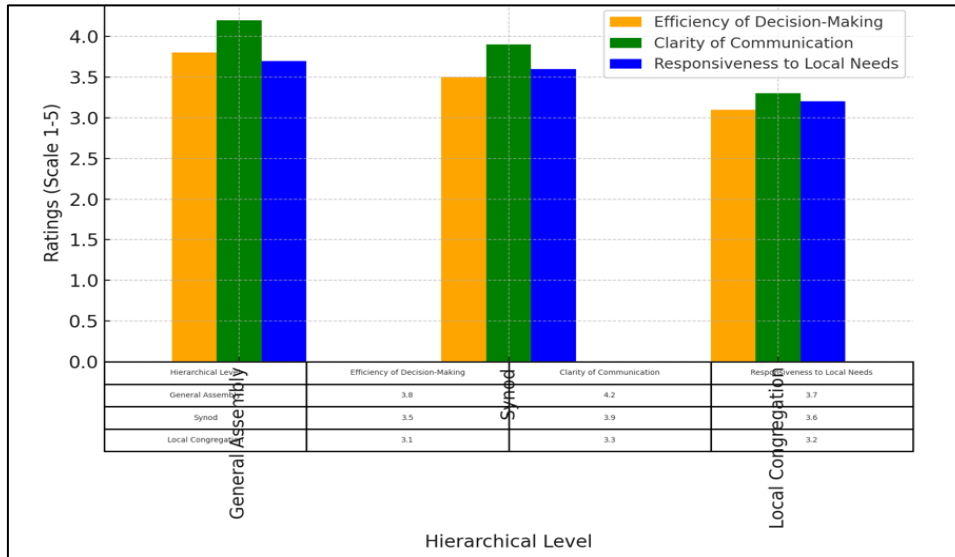
The analysis of quantitative data on the impact of the hierarchical structure on decision-making within the UCZ revealed that the General Assembly received the highest ratings in all three measured areas: Efficiency of Decision-Making (3.8), Clarity of Communication (4.2), and Responsiveness to Local Needs (3.7). This indicates that the General Assembly is perceived as the most effective decision-making body within the hierarchy. The Synods followed with moderately high scores: 3.5 for Efficiency, 3.9 for Clarity, and 3.6 for Responsiveness. These figures suggest that while Synods function effectively, they are perceived as slightly less efficient and responsive than the General Assembly.

The Local Congregations received the lowest scores across all categories: 3.1 for Efficiency, 3.3 for Clarity of Communication, and 3.2 for Responsiveness to Local Needs. This indicates that local leaders experience more challenges in decision implementation and communication, potentially due to the top-down structure of the hierarchy. The data reflects a top-heavy effectiveness pattern in the UCZ’s hierarchical structure. Higher levels (General Assembly and Synod) are perceived as more effective, while effectiveness diminishes at the grassroots level. This suggests a gap in communication flow and decision adaptability, which may hinder local leaders from responding effectively to community needs. The findings underscore the importance of strengthening communication and empowering local congregations to ensure more inclusive and efficient decision-making throughout the hierarchy.

Table 1: Hierarchical Structure’s Impact on General Decision-Making Process

Hierarchical Level	Efficiency of Decision-Making	Clarity of Communication	Responsiveness to Local Needs
General Assembly	3.8	4.2	3.7
Synod	3.5	3.9	3.6
Local Congregation	3.1	3.3	3.2

Source: Author’s compilation from Field Data, 2025



Source: Author’s compilation from Field Data, 2025

Figure 6: Hierarchical Structure’s Impact on General Decision-Making Process

4.3 Descriptive Statistics

Based on the descriptive statistics from Table 2 and Figure 7, the General Assembly received the highest mean scores across all variables: Efficiency of Decision-Making (3.8), Clarity of Communication (4.2), and Responsiveness to Local Needs (3.7). These results suggest that the General Assembly is perceived as the most effective level in terms of overall governance and communication within the UCZ hierarchy. The Synod level scored moderately across the variables with 3.5 for Efficiency, 3.9 for Clarity of Communication, and 3.6 for Responsiveness. While these scores reflect a generally positive perception of Synod operations, they are slightly lower than those of the General Assembly, indicating some relative limitations in effectiveness and communication. The Local Congregation scored the lowest in all three areas: Efficiency of Decision-Making (3.1), Clarity of Communication (3.3), and Responsiveness to Local Needs (3.2). This pattern indicates that local leaders encounter more significant obstacles in implementing decisions, particularly due to issues in clarity and contextual fit of directives from higher levels.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Decision-Making Variables

Variable	Mean	Std Dev.	Min	Max
Efficiency of Decision-Making (General Assembly)	3.8	0.9	2	5
Clarity of Communication (General Assembly)	4.2	0.7	3	5
Responsiveness to Local Needs (General Assembly)	3.7	0.8	2	5
Efficiency of Decision-Making (Synod)	3.5	1.0	2	5
Clarity of Communication (Synod)	3.9	0.9	3	5
Responsiveness to Local Needs (Synod)	3.6	0.8	2	5
Efficiency of Decision-Making (Local Congregation)	3.1	1.1	1	5
Clarity of Communication (Local Congregation)	3.3	1.0	2	5
Responsiveness to Local Needs (Local Congregation)	3.2	1.1	1	5

Source: Author’s compilation from Field Data, 2025

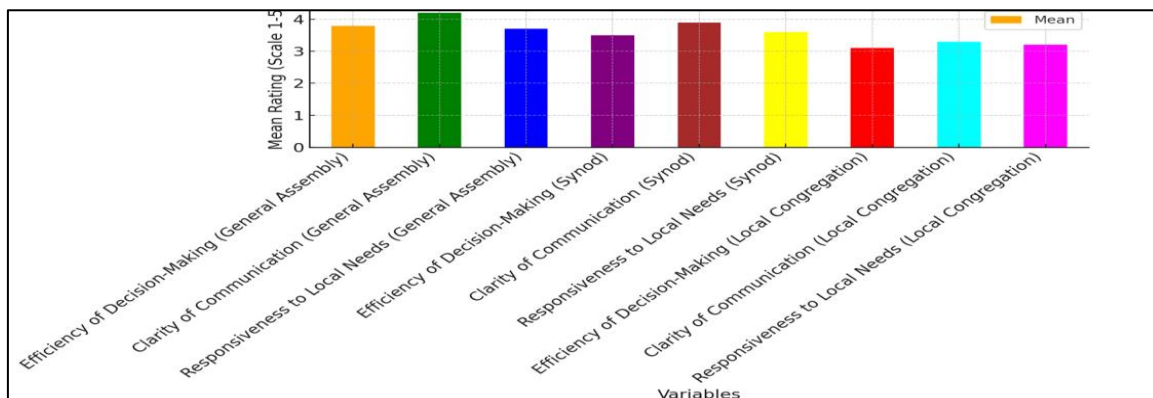


Figure 7: Descriptive Statistics of Decision-Making Variables by UCZ Hierarchical Level

4.4 Chi-Square Tests

Contingency Table for Efficiency of Decision-Making by Hierarchical Level

The Chi-Square test for Efficiency of Decision-Making as shown in Table 3 produced a χ^2 value of 16.2 with a p-value of 0.003, indicating a statistically significant relationship between hierarchical level and perceived efficiency in decision-making. General Assembly leaders were perceived as the most efficient, followed by Synod leaders, with Local Congregations rated the least efficient. The findings suggest that perceptions of decision-making efficiency increase with hierarchical level. Central leadership at the General Assembly is viewed as more strategic and decisive, whereas Local Congregation leaders face operational challenges that diminish perceived efficiency.

Table 3: Contingency Table for Efficiency of Decision-Making by Hierarchical Level

Hierarchical Level	Efficient	Neutral	Inefficient	Total	χ^2 -Statistics	DF	P-Value
General Assembly	45	15	10	70	16.2	4	0.003
Synod	35	10	10	55			
Local Congregation	25	25	20	60			
Total	105	50	40	170			

Source: Author’s compilation from Field Data, 2025

Contingency Table for Clarity of Communication by Hierarchical Level

The Chi-Square test for Clarity of Communication as shown in Table 4 below returned a χ^2 value of 12.8 with a p-value of 0.02, confirming a significant relationship between hierarchical level and clarity of communication. General Assembly communications were rated the clearest, with Synod and Local Congregations receiving lower clarity scores. Clearer communication is associated with higher hierarchical levels. This gap in clarity from General Assembly to grassroots levels points to potential breakdowns in message delivery as decisions move down the chain.

Table 4: Contingency Table for Clarity of Communication by Hierarchical Level

Hierarchical Level	Efficient	Neutral	Inefficient	Total	χ^2 -Statistics	DF	P-Value
General Assembly	50	15	5	70	12.800	4	0.020
Synod	40	10	5	55			
Local Congregation	30	20	10	60			
Total	120	45	20	170			

Source: Author’s compilation from Field Data, 2025

Contingency Table for Responsiveness to Local Needs by Hierarchical Level

The Chi-Square test for Responsiveness to Local Needs as indicate in Table 5 below produced a χ^2 value of 14.1 with a p-value of 0.03, showing a significant relationship between hierarchical level and responsiveness to local needs. General Assembly showed moderate responsiveness, while Local Congregations were perceived as less responsive. Responsiveness decreases at lower hierarchical levels, potentially due to inadequate adaptation of central decisions to local contexts. This reinforces concerns about the rigidity of hierarchical structures.

Table 5: Contingency Table for Responsiveness to Local Needs by Hierarchical Level

Hierarchical Level	Efficient	Neutral	Inefficient	Total	χ^2 -Statistics	DF	P-Value
General Assembly	40	20	10	70	14.100	4	0.030
Synod	35	10	10	55			
Local Congregation	30	20	10	60			
Total	105	50	30	170			

Source: Author’s compilation from Field Data, 2025

4.5 Multiple Regression Analysis

The multiple regression analysis in Table 6 yielded a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.784, indicating a strong positive relationship between the predictor variables—General Assembly Leadership (GAL), Synod Leadership (SYL), Local Congregation Leadership (LCL), and Responsiveness to Local Needs (RLN)—and the dependent variable, Decision-Making Efficiency (DME). The R^2 value of 0.614 suggests that approximately 61.4% of the variation in decision-making efficiency can be explained by these predictors, with the adjusted R^2 slightly lower at 0.603. The standard error of 0.388 reflects a relatively low margin of prediction error, while the Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.02 confirms that there is no significant autocorrelation in the residuals, thereby validating the independence of observations. All four independent variables were statistically significant predictors of decision-making efficiency. General Assembly Leadership (B = 0.341, p = 0.000) positively influences efficiency by contributing strategic oversight. Synod Leadership (B = 0.275, p = 0.014) also plays a key role, particularly in translating strategic directives to mid-level implementation. Local Congregation Leadership

($B = 0.365$, $p = 0.000$) had a slightly stronger influence, affirming the operational importance of grassroots leadership. Responsiveness to Local Needs ($B = 0.412$, $p = 0.000$) emerged as the most influential factor, highlighting the pivotal role of contextual adaptability in enhancing decision-making effectiveness. These results demonstrate that while top-tier guidance shapes policy direction, the execution and success of decision-making rely heavily on the leadership capacity and responsiveness at the local level.

Table 6: Multiple Regression Results

Model	R	R Square	Adj. R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		Durbin-Watson
1	0.784	0.614	0.603	0.388		2.02
Model	Sum of Squares		df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Regression	76.543	4	19.136	56.07	0.000
	Residual	48.124	165	0.291		
	Total	124.667	169			
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.		
	B	Std. Error				
1	(Constant)	1.292	0.198	6.528	0.000	
	General Assembly Leadership (GAL)	0.341	0.120	2.842	0.005	
	Synod Leadership (SYL)	0.275	0.110	2.500	0.014	
	Local Congregation Leadership (LCL)	0.365	0.089	4.104	0.000	
	Responsiveness to Local Needs (RLN)	0.412	0.075	5.493	0.000	

a. Dependent Variable: Decision Making Efficiency (DME)

b. Predictors: (Constant), General Assembly Leadership (GAL), Synod Leadership (SYL), Local Congregation Leadership (LCL), Responsiveness to Local Needs (RLN)

Source: SPSS Output from Survey Data, 2025

4.6 Qualitative Analysis

This section presents a qualitative analysis of the study, which aimed to understand the decision-making processes within the UCZ, particularly at the local congregational level in Lusaka District. The qualitative data was gathered from semi-structured interviews with church leaders at various hierarchical levels, including General Assembly, Synod, and Local Congregation Leaders. The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, and several key themes emerged that provided insight into the study's objectives. Furthermore, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns in the data. Each participant's responses were coded based on key themes that aligned with the study's objectives. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they captured the nuances of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Theme 1: Challenges in Implementing Decisions at the Local Level

One of the primary themes that emerged was the challenges faced by local congregational leaders in applying decisions made by higher hierarchical levels. Local leaders expressed frustrations regarding the disconnect between decisions made at the General Assembly and their ability to implement them effectively in the local context. In line with this, one participant stated that: "We receive directives from the Synod and General Assembly, but sometimes these are not realistic for our congregation's situation. We are often left with no resources or support to carry out what is asked of us."

Theme 2: Importance of Clear Communication from Higher Levels

A second prominent theme was the need for clearer communication from the General Assembly and Synod leadership. Many participants emphasized that the clarity and timeliness of communication directly influenced how decisions were perceived and implemented at the local level. For instance, one participant indicated that: "The messages we get from the General Assembly are sometimes vague, and we struggle to understand what exactly is expected of us. If we don't have clear guidelines, it's hard to make decisions on the ground."

Theme 3: The Role of Local Congregational Leadership in Decision-Making Efficiency

A third key theme focused on the critical role that local congregational leaders play in ensuring decision-making efficiency. Despite challenges, many local leaders expressed a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to their congregations. They emphasized that their knowledge of local needs allowed them to adapt decisions in a way that would be more effective for their communities. Where one participant quoted saying: "As a local leader, I know what my congregation needs better than anyone else. When decisions come from the General Assembly, I try to adapt them to fit our context. It's not always easy, but it's necessary."

Theme 4: Responsiveness to Local Needs as a Key Mediator

The final theme identified was the importance of responsiveness to local needs in improving the efficiency of decision-making. Participants at all hierarchical levels acknowledged that local leaders have a unique ability to assess community

needs and adapt decisions accordingly. They emphasized that responsiveness to local circumstances played a critical role in ensuring that decisions were implemented in a manner that met community expectations and needs. One participant was also quoted saying: “Decisions made in Lusaka don’t always take into account the situation here in our rural congregation. We try our best to make them work, but they would be more effective if we had more flexibility.”

4.7 Discussion of Results

RO1: Influence of the Hierarchical Structure on Decision-Making Processes at the Local Congregational Level

The results from both the quantitative and qualitative data reveal a significant influence of the UCZ's hierarchical structure on decision-making processes at the local congregational level. Chi-square tests showed that perceptions of decision-making efficiency, clarity of communication, and responsiveness to local needs were significantly associated with hierarchical level. General Assembly leadership was consistently rated higher across all categories, followed by Synods, with local congregations receiving the lowest ratings. The multiple regression analysis reinforced this, indicating that while all leadership levels significantly affect decision-making efficiency, Local Congregation Leadership (LCL) and Responsiveness to Local Needs (RLN) had the most substantial impact.

These findings confirm the conceptual framework's assumption that hierarchical leadership plays a crucial role in shaping decision-making but also highlight the mediating role of RLN. The Garbage Can Model helps explain the inconsistencies in decision implementation, as decisions made at higher levels do not always align with the contextual realities at the local level. The findings are in agreement with Mumba (2018) and Chirwa (2019), who argue that the rigid hierarchical approach in the UCZ impairs flexibility and responsiveness at the grassroots.

RO2: Role of the General Assembly and Synod Leadership in Addressing Local Needs

The study found that while the General Assembly and Synods are perceived to be more efficient and communicate more clearly, they fall short in addressing the specific needs of local congregations. Quantitative data showed that responsiveness to local needs was significantly lower at these levels compared to their ratings for efficiency and clarity. Qualitative themes echoed this finding, with local leaders expressing frustrations over the unrealistic nature of directives and lack of practical support.

Theoretically, Weber's Bureaucratic Theory helps frame these findings by emphasizing the order and uniformity that hierarchical systems bring. However, these same features introduce rigidity, limiting the system's ability to adapt to localized contexts. This critique aligns with literature by Khan and Zada (2020), who argue that centralization may promote doctrinal unity but hampers responsiveness and contextual relevance. The study thus disagrees with the assumption that central leadership alone can sufficiently address local needs, calling for a more decentralized, participatory approach.

RO3: Challenges Faced by Local Congregational Leaders in Applying Higher-Level Decisions

The qualitative analysis highlighted multiple challenges faced by local leaders, including resource constraints, communication gaps, and limited autonomy. These themes are strongly supported by the quantitative data, where local leaders rated lowest in terms of efficiency and communication clarity. In the multiple regression model, Local Congregation Leadership ($B = 0.365$, $p = 0.000$) was one of the strongest predictors of decision-making efficiency, underscoring the importance of grassroots leadership in implementing directives effectively. These findings strongly validate the Garbage Can Model's assertion that decision-making is often messy and dependent on situational factors rather than structured rules. They also affirm the mediating importance of RLN ($B = 0.412$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that local responsiveness bridges the gap between hierarchical decisions and effective implementation. This supports the work of Chirwa (2019) and Nkhoma (2021), who stress that empowering local leaders is essential for improving organizational performance. In conclusion, the study reveals both strengths and weaknesses in the UCZ's hierarchical structure. While it provides strategic direction and consistency, its centralization poses significant challenges to responsiveness and effective local decision-making. Empowering local leadership and enhancing communication flow across all levels are critical steps for the church to improve decision-making efficiency and community responsiveness.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The study's findings underscore that the hierarchical structure within the UCZ—including General Assembly, Synod, and Local Congregational Leadership—has a substantial influence on decision-making efficiency, particularly at the grassroots level. Based on the regression analysis, Responsiveness to Local Needs (RLN) emerged as the strongest predictor of decision-making efficiency, accounting for a significant proportion of the variance ($p < 0.001$). This supports Objective iii, which sought to examine how responsiveness to local needs affects decision-making efficiency. The data revealed that the ability of local leaders to contextualize and adapt top-level decisions is crucial for successful implementation. Furthermore, General Assembly and Synod leadership were shown to play critical roles in providing strategic direction, aligning with Objective i, which investigated how hierarchical levels influence decision-making. However, their impact is limited when decisions do not adequately consider local socio-economic realities. These findings are supported by Mumba (2018), who emphasized the importance of local empowerment in faith-based governance, and Khan & Zada (2020), who argued that while centralization supports unity, it often restricts responsiveness. Qualitative results reinforced these conclusions by highlighting implementation challenges at the local level, including vague directives and resource constraints. This confirms assertions by Chirwa (2019) about the disconnect between central leadership and local execution in religious institutions. These insights resonate with Weber's Bureaucratic Theory (1922), which praises order and control but

acknowledges inflexibility as a drawback, and the Garbage Can Model, which explains how decisions are shaped by the availability of solutions, actors, and situational context. Ultimately, the findings affirm that although higher leadership tiers provide strategic oversight, effective governance depends significantly on empowering local leaders and ensuring that top-down decisions are adaptable to local conditions. This critical reflection provides both theoretical and practical contributions to religious governance.

Implications of the Study

The implications of the study are twofold—organisational and operational. From a governance perspective, the UCZ must revisit its decision-making model to incorporate mechanisms for local adaptation. This supports Objective ii, which explored the role of leadership levels in enhancing decision-making processes. Decentralization of certain decisions would allow leaders at the grassroots to tailor responses to their congregational realities, particularly in dynamic urban environments like Lusaka. Operationally, the findings suggest that equipping local leaders with adequate resources, training, and autonomy would bridge the gap between central directives and local implementation. Such support systems would improve not only execution but also decision ownership at the local level. This echoes prior research that highlights how empowered leadership enhances organisational agility in complex contexts. Moreover, the study implies that centralized governance—while critical for maintaining doctrinal integrity—must evolve to accommodate structural and demographic shifts affecting local congregations. Integrating local feedback into strategic planning would improve policy relevance and reinforce organisational trust among congregants.

Recommendations of the Study

- Empower Local Leaders: It is essential for the UCZ to empower local leaders by providing them with more decision-making autonomy. This would allow local congregations to respond more effectively to the unique socio-economic challenges they face, particularly in urban areas like Lusaka.
- Improve Communication and Clarity of Decisions: Clearer communication from the General Assembly and Synods would ensure that decisions are understood and easily implemented at the local level. Providing guidelines that are both detailed and flexible will help local leaders adapt decisions to their specific contexts.
- Decentralize Decision-Making: The UCZ should consider decentralizing certain decisions, particularly those related to local congregational needs, to enable quicker and more relevant responses at the grassroots level.
- Incorporate Local Needs in Strategic Planning: The General Assembly and Synods should engage more directly with local congregations to better understand their needs and ensure that decisions align with these needs.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicting interests

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Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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