**This paper has been revised since delivering it at the Project Violet Symposium in January 2025 based upon the feedback from that discussion.**

**Power and Authority in UK and Aotearoa NZ Baptist Worlds**

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**Introduction**

Project Violet is a Baptist initiative seeking to address sexism, racism, and ableism in the UK and this presentation is my own analysis of some data from NZ Baptists related to authority and power. I believe this has resonance with some of the findings within Project Violet as it relates especially to agency and discernment. Baptist ecclesiology, in theory, should organically address sexism, racism, and ableism because communal discernment is based on every believer potentially hearing the voice of the Spirit and having space to express what is heard, and thus every member is vital to the body. However, in practice this is often not the case, and I believe this is because we are unaware of the power in the room and also ill-equipped to facilitate actual discernment. Thus, this paper will propose some ways forward in bridging theory and practice that may have application both in the UK and here in Aotearoa.

**Analysis of my own data**

In April 2024, I ran an online survey through formal and informal Baptist networks to help with a book on authority I was writing as well as “projects the Baptist union is working on as it relates to Big Bite 3: A Mechanism to Ensure Our People and Places are Safe.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This work preceded the release of the Abuse in Care Royal Commission report, which explicitly links abuse in care with perceived authority of church leaders.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this survey, 103 respondents identified themselves according to role (in a formal leadership role or not), gender, ethnicity, and age. Four major groups emerged: Leaders, non-Leaders, Male, and Female. The majority were NZ European 86/103. The remainder were 3 Māori, 3 Asian, 3 Pacifica, 2 preferred not to specify, 1 African, and 1 other ethnicity. 52 respondents ticked female, 47 ticked male, 2 did not specify, and 1 ticked non-binary. Overall, 61 identified as leaders and 42 as non-leaders. Given the online outlets for the survey, which were mostly leadership spaces, the higher proportion of leaders to non-leaders is unsurprising. While more women than men completed the survey, the largest group was male leaders (31/103). The most diverse group, by way of age and ethnicity were female non-leaders and the least diverse group, by age and ethnicity, were male leaders.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The first two questions of the survey were about people’s general associations with authority and power. Then the questions were about who in their *church* would they say has authority and how do they know that and then the same for power. Then I asked about healthy practices of power used in their context. While I found that, overall, respondents were more likely to view power negatively and authority positively in the first two questions, the distinction between power and authority was not consistently maintained after the first two questions were answered. Thus, in my analysis, I will treat them as a shared concept.

While I am interested in women’s experiences of church and leadership, I believe questions about power and authority provide a larger gloss to think about how we relate to one another in Baptist churches. Thus, I am especially interested in comparing the responses of leaders and non-leaders. Further, as a Baptist, two theological principles were on my mind as I analyzed the data. First, the aim of discerning the mind of Christ collectively—since he is the ultimate authority. Second, and relatedly, the priesthood of all believers—since each Spirit-gifted saint is, in principle, able to discern Christ’s authority.[[4]](#footnote-4) According to Ruth Moriarty, mentioned as an expert on Baptist discernment in resolution 48 of Project Violet’s research: “The priesthood of all believers is a Baptist theological belief where all Christians are deemed able to have the liberty to gather and discern God’s will in scripture and by meeting together.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Each believer’s agency is thus critical in Baptist ecclesiology. This value was stated beautifully in one respondent who said: “there is always an expectation that God can and does speak through anyone.” My question is whether or not we have mechanisms to listen.

**Leaders and Non-Leaders**

To begin, how did respondents perceive power and authority in practice? Comparing leaders and non-leaders, I found that the majority of both non-leaders (32/42) and leaders (44/61) associated power and authority with the ability to make decisions and influence change. A helpful shorthand for this is “agency.” Further, the majority of non-leaders (28/42) and leaders (45/61) saw a concentration of authority/power in formal roles, though leaders were slightly more likely than non-leaders to mention this. Conversely, 13/42 (31%) of non-leaders described power/authority as shared across the community apart from formal roles—though formal roles could be included. Non-leaders were slightly more likely than leaders to see authority/power as shared and they named this power-sharing as based on character, wisdom, and structures that the church had in place to make sure power was shared. Only 14/61 leaders (23%) also described this diffusion of authority in their own church contexts. *Thus, the value of agency was strongly held across both groups, however, who has that agency was more strongly concentrated in those with formal roles.*

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|  | Non-leader (42) | Leader (61) |
| Question: When you hear the word "authority"/“power” what is the first word that comes to mind?  Theme: **Agency--Make Decisions and Affect Change** | 76% (32/42) | 72% (44/61) |
| Question: In your church, which groups or individuals do you think have/has authority/power?  Theme: **Only Concentrated/Formal roles** | 66% (28/42) | 74% (45/61) |
| Question: In your church, which groups or individuals do you think have/has authority/power?  Theme: **Diffused/Informal and Formal Roles** | 31% (13/42) | 23% (14/61) |

Given that Baptist ecclesiology is rooted in the priesthood of all believers, agency-supportive practices would be expected in this sample, and there were many excellent examples given. However, only 12/42 (29%) of non-leaders identified such practices, and 20/61 (33%) of leaders did so (see Appendix for direct statements). Tellingly, of the rare mentions of Christ’s authority (2/42 (5%) non-leaders; 5/61 leaders (8%)), *all of them* occurred in responses which also identified agency-supportive practices.[[6]](#footnote-6) So, though this sample size is small, the recognition of Christ’s authority were positively correlated with agency-supportive practices.

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|  | Non-leader (42) | Leader (61) |
| Theme: Identified Agency Supportive Practices | 29% (12/42) | 33% (20/61) |
| Theme: Christ’s Authority\* | 5% (2/42) | 8% (5/61) |

(\*All mentions occurred within respondents who had identified agency supportive practices.)

Four other themes emerged that, while also small in number, are significant to note: mention the priesthood of all believers; outright rejections of power/authority being operative; belief and practice of Christocracy; and how power is related to money.

First, three non-leaders (3/42) recognized that the priesthood of all believers is meant to be operative but this is actually not the case. *Only* non-leaders both named that this should be a value in their context *and* denied that this is the case:

* “I havent seen this demonstrated in at all in our leadership, but I see it in other churches where consultation, real listening to the priesthood of believers is practiced, also I am encouraged by the leadership resources available through BU,”
* “I shouldn't have to say this - it seems the Pastor & Elders have all the authority & imbalance of power ..its not servant leadership. We are the priesthood of all believers & equal in Gods sight.”
* “In the Baptist setting we’ve perhaps made the mistake of elevating pastor and elder roles while just talking about everyone being a ‘priest’ – we perhaps don’t believe that anymore, and should work hard at minimising the pastor and elder roles, perhaps trialing ways of not having the 'professional' full-time 'leader' who are consuming much more resource than they are perhaps worth to a local faith community.”

In contrast, one leader recognized the priesthood of all believers and also had practical ways to support this belief. That was the only positive mention of this concept in the 103 responses.

Second, there were three outright rejections of there being any power or authority in play and, tellingly, this was only present in the leaders’ responses—two male respondents and one who did not specify. The comments were:

* “We are a servant driven community, no one uses power”,
* “Possibly not any. VERY flat structure”, “I don’t think power is used in my context.”
* “None, we’re a Baptist church…”

Notably, none of these respondents also identified agency-supportive practices in their later answers.

While these respondents were only 5% (3/61) of the leaders, three critical observations can be made. First, *all* non-leaders could identify where power/authority exists. Second, *all* denials of power/authority came from leaders. Third, only *non-leaders* called out the “priesthood of all believers” as a fiction. These three observations reveal a disparity between leaders and non-leaders about Baptist ecclesiology in practice that we will return to in the discussion section.

Relatedly, and bringing us to the third theme, when looking more closely at the “lived ecclesiology” of those who identified Christ’s authority, there was a distinction in Christocracy in theory and in practice. Out of the entire sample of 103 respondents, only 5 respondents identified Christocracy in how they practiced authority and power—5% overall.[[7]](#footnote-7) They both named Christ’s Lordship and then described how the church shares power through specific practices such as prayerful discernment, sharing the mic, having regular family meetings with space for open questions and feedback, building trust, and having whole church involvement in making decisions.

Finally, another theme emerged relating to money. Looking at the association of power and authority with money was also illuminative in comparing leaders and non-leaders. Non-leaders were more likely to state this association with 8/42 (19%) making this connection. Leaders were less likely to state this at 5/61 (8%). However, more than frequency was the emphasis on *whose* money was associated with power. For non-leaders 7/8 associated being paid or employed as a staff member as evidence of one’s authority or power. The non-leader outlier noted the power of being a big giver and the Senior pastor knowing that and granting power to that person. For leaders, 4 of those 5 saw this power in association with big givers—those with resource to make things happen, with only one noting paid staff. In other words, there was little recognition within both groups of the power they themselves would wield—as a congregant with money—or as a leader on the payroll—though nearly 1 in 5 non-leaders noted that being paid affects that persons’ having authority/power.

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|  | Non-leader (42) | Leader (61) |
| Question: How can you tell who has authority/power  Theme: being paid staff | 17% (7/42) | 2% (1/61) |
| Question: How can you tell who has authority/power  Theme: being a big giver | 2% (1/42) | 6% (4/61) |

**Discussion**

For a survey of Baptists, I was surprised by how little Jesus’s authority and the priesthood of all believers featured in these responses. At the same time, I was so encouraged by the specific agency supportive practices that were noted and how these correlated with the few instances of Christocracy that were mentioned. Across leaders and non-leaders, agency supportive practices included: listening, creating contexts of belonging, having open elder’s meetings, prayer, discussion, disagreement, debate, free-for-all, questioning, sharing the pulpit, transparency in board/elder meetings, being ok with diverse views, everyone being able to speak and contribute, going slowly, those with power not always getting their way, being open to criticism, giving leadership away, making decisions across multiple mediums (like small groups), considering the vulnerable highly, having term limits for elders, having accountability of leadership to members and members to members, accepting you could be wrong (leader response), and having mechanisms for anonymous feedback.

Many of these mechanisms are corroborated by Moriarty, who encourages “slow wisdom” and processes that allow for everyone to participate. Further, “Slow wisdom is not present when the Church Meeting fails to listen to all members.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In fact, she argues convincingly, that when a “Church Meeting discerns without all members attending or members attending but not participating, it struggles to adhere to Baptist theological principles of the gathered church and the priesthood of all believers.”[[9]](#footnote-9) From her own research, she further observes that “when slow wisdom is not used existing church members struggle to participate if they are younger members, members from other denominations and Black and Brown church members.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Given how few Māori engaged in this study (3/103, none of whom were leaders), as well as the documented exodus of young people, and women, one wonders if these proposed remedies of inclusive discernment might apply in our context as well.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Further, Moriarty recognises the mismatch of understanding of Baptist ecclesiology and what it really is, let alone rightly understanding it but not practicing it. She engages with J. Terry Young and the meaning of the priesthood of all believers becoming distorted by shifting “the practice of the Church Meeting towards a model of democracy where the individual view and right to vote (in particular) is held tighter than the responsibility to discern together and remain part of the body of the church.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This bore out in my data with some emphasising voting and democracy (9/42 [21%] non-leaders; 6/61 [10%] leaders). Such figures may support an overlap with what Moriarty observes in a UK context in which “The individual right to vote without intentional listening to each other has become writ large in our identity and it fails to honour the intention of scripture and our Baptist forebears.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Voting and democratic process are often associated with efficient decision-making.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, while discernment should lead to decision-making (even if that decision is to wait), decision-making does not necessarily lead to discernment or mean that discernment has taken place.

Moriarty also mentions practices that she identifies as contributing to healthy discernment, which were also triangulated in my data set, making further connections to foster discernment. She found in her project data “that churches who encourage all members to participate in discussion are more likely to determine they have discerned the mind of Christ.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus, agency of all members is positively correlated with fruitful discernment. Insightfully, Moriarty claims that “Creating or renewing a sense of belonging in the Baptist Church Meeting is a practical expression of the Baptist biblical belief of Christians belonging to the priesthood of all believers.”[[16]](#footnote-16) I would propose that agency supportive practices are an important way to actualise this collective priesthood. One of the ways you know you belong is if it matters that you are there.

Baptist ecclesiology, at its best, looks like “hearing different voices in discernment. Baptists listen carefully to emotion and the lone voice, listening in this way turns the Meeting from an expected outcome to an outcome believed to be the mind of Christ.”[[17]](#footnote-17) However, from my data set, Baptists, including Baptist leaders may not be facilitating true discernment—recalling that out of the entire sample of 103 respondents, only 5 respondents identified Christocracy in practice—5% overall. Yet, those 5% also indicate the key to creating contexts of belonging wherein the priesthood of believers can gather to genuinely discern the mind of Christ. Similarly, in Project Violet, Resolution 15 recognises the need for good training in how to facilitate “effective discernment.” This need seems present in our context as well.

**Conclusion**

My hope is by naming the power in the room, the dominant culture blind spots, and identifying agency supportive practices, we might see more truly Baptist expressions of the body of Christ—spaces in which we have mechanisms to listen because “there is always an expectation that God can and does speak through anyone.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

**APPENDIX: Agency Supportive Practices**

**NonLeaders (12 respondents):**

* “Actually do hui’s. We sit, listen and hear one another. When we disagree we sit with that disagreement and try to understand one another’s perspective”
* “I think our church is democratic. We vote on important issues and we are fortunate to have many thinkers who represent different viewpoints. It's pretty difficult for one charismatic person to sway the church, given our current members.”
* “Job descriptions/appraisal processes ensure accountability. Policies re complaints are in place. We have opportunities for discussion and debate - these happen in different formats. We believe it is healthy to have these. Our practice of having free-for-all (a sort of open-mic thing) keeps us grounded and listening. It keeps the minister or leadership from having the last word.”
* “the[y] get people to vote on things and we have church meetings where people get to have a say”
* “Sharing the pulpit, church family meetings, transparency in board meetings”
* “In a formal sense, we have quarterly meetings, usually held on a Sunday, so that anyone can engage with church issues and practice. More informally, we have a free-for-all every Sunday when people can respond to the sermon or bring up anything at all.”
* “Others are asked to curate worship (although some people are never shoulder-tapped). Listening to others, but actually listening and allowing other people's diverse opinions and experiences to influence one's leadership decisions. Allowing for conflicting opinions, ones that may hurt. Keeping processes transparent. Attempting to have an eldership that is not all White, and not all male.”
* “Ensuring that the voice of the church community is central to our practices of power. We believe that ultimate power and authority in the church lies with Jesus and that the role of the community is together to discern the mind of Christ. This discernment is centralised in our practice.”
* “They provide for church-wide discussions on big decisions at church meetings and set up fair voting for this. They promote "seeking the mind of Christ together" by talking about and praying for big issues at Church services and meetings.” [CHRISTOCRACY in THEORY]—55-64, Female
* “Everyone has opportunity to speak and contribute. Decisions are made at members' meetings and sometimes they take a while to be made. Deacons bring recommendations but these are not always followed through. Our minister is very good at ensuring that power is shared and not abused.” [CHRISTOCRACY in PRACTICE]—25-34, Female
* “person to person careful discussion and group meetings 1/4 ly church meetings. 'free for all' discussion in church services.”
* “Asking questions, being open to criticism or feedback, listening, opening conversation to all in dignifying ways, taking time to move slowly if need be, having dedicated space to pray and discern together, stating and recognising privileges and authority/power.”

**Leaders (20 respondents):**

* “Listening, consulting, compassion. Whole church involvement in decisions.” [Christocracy in practice: “The gathered church under Christ. I also think we have some individuals who are trusted, and this leads to a kind of unofficial authority, they have earned this trust by ongoing trustworthy action and care.”] Female 45-54 (#14)
* “Delegate task and reference that person as the person to go to, speak it from the front on Sundays, find ways for people to lead and use power in their gifting”
* “Elevate congregation’s authority - over governance – thereby increasing accountability and individual buy-in. We encourage prayer/discernment prior to ‘voting’. To the point, if you haven’t prayed, please abstain. We are going to increase our quorum numbers meaning more of our members need to be involved…Seek to have a high number of people using the mic on a Sunday.” [Christocracy in practice: members must discern before being allowed to be involved plus several other mechanisms to de-centralise power of leaders over against that of the body] Female 45-54 (#27)
* “The Leadership Team use a consensus model when decisions are made. Also we are diligent to be transparent and include the whole church in decisions.”
* “Always be open to feedback. Put that feedback into action. Give responsibility and authority away to the next generation as you scaffold them through that responsibility.”
* “Consultation church wide on big decisions, regular communication about decisions and what elders are doing, regular meetings with senior pastor and staff.”
* “church meetings. try to prevent group think by doing participatory exercises. spread out decision making across multiple mediums.”
* “Use a process where we seek and the Lord and make collective decisions rather than one or two people making the decisions and having the power. ie more of a collaborative approach.”
* “Many voices are encouraged to input into the way 'church' or ministry etc happens. Deciding doesn't happen quickly. Ideas are put forward to the collective before decisions are made. Vulnerable are highly considered. Look to what Jesus would teach, and what the gospel is about.”
* “Having an eldership cycle so no one can serve for more than 4years at a time. General meetings with the full congregation. External auditors.”
* “Being consultative with decision making. Using reflective practices to consider impacts of actions. Hopefully using our power to enable others to take risks and grow.”
* “We have an open session "free for all" at the end of every church service that enables anyone to give feedback on any element of the service or question any statement made by anyone else. We elect all church positions by democratic vote and they are accountable to members. We carry out performance reviews on all employed persons including getting feedback on such persons from church members. We have a community ethos which we hold each other accountable to.”
* “An open door policy for members to attend an Elders' meeting to share their views (few take this up)”
* “We regularly invite feedback. We conduct annual reviews. Deacons are permitted to meet to discuss the pastors without the pastors being present. We share the mic (e.g., lots of different preachers and voices in Sunday services). We create space for people to share. We delay or change decisions when feedback suggests we should. We hold quarterly church meetings. We communicate regularly. We accept we can be wrong. We are careful in dressing decisions in theological language. We have external supervision.”
* “We are very aware of the potential for power imbalances, so there are a number of practices that we have embedded in what we do. Some of the practices are: We do not use raised staging at church (this means everyone is on the same level). Anyone is free to ask questions during a sermon (and this often happens). We do not do anything with a cost attached (e.g. our fortnightly meals are free and provided to all, so there are no barriers associated with cost). When people come with needs, we respond by asking them what they need. If we are able to help- this is then provided freely without obligation. We distribute power to those in charge of the food bank (they just need to let us know what they need, or they can purchase with same day reimbursement of expenses). Those who volunteer at the op shop are fully empowered - knowing that our primary goal is to provide low cost clothing and money is secondary (items are usually less than 1 dollar). We see ourselves as a channel that distributes what is given to us, onwards to those who are in need (this contrasts with seeing ourselves as owners of what is given).”
* “Making it OK to ask questions”
* “There is always an expectation that God can and does speak through anyone.” (but what are the mechanisms to hear them?) [Christocracy vaguely—recognition that “most of the church” has authority “Because each is listened to”] 45-54, Male (#68)
* “Share the mic! Have quarterly “family meetings” with space for open prayer, questions, feedback. Ensure leaders have external supervision. Eldership terms.” [Christocracy in practice, authority is held by “The members who gather under the rule of Jesus Christ, indwelled by his Spirit” and priesthood of all believers is referred to positively, with actions that are consistent with this belief! Also, a recognition of his power but also the power of others, “Anyone who has relational influence, but especially those who are recognised/appointed leaders.” And how he knows “I / They influence others. Their voices are heard and carry weight. They are in a position (formally or informally) either to open opportunities for others or to shut them down.” Male 25-34 (#78)
* “Anonymous ways to raise concerns”
* “Offering space for all comments to be heard and considered, good questions, inviting feedback and reflecting on what they receive”—though inconsistent with Christocracy in practice. It’s Christocracy in theory: who has authority, “The pastoral team, the preachers, the leadership/eldership team, the squeeky wheels (those who almost always contribute to meeting conversations etc)” and how do you know, “Those who have a seat at the table for important conversations, they are allowed to speak, they are asked for their opinion/viewpoint, things they bring up are acted upon/considered.” Who has power, “Jesus first and foremost, the pastor, the eldership, ministry team leaders, members.” And how do you know? “They are all willing to dialogue with differing viewpoints and convictions, they speak up when they need to (there isn't a permission seeking first).”

1. This survey’s content and mode of dissemination was vetted and approved through Carey Baptist College’s ethics process as this is the institution where I am employed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.abuseincare.org.nz/reports/whanaketia/part-7/chapter-8/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The 52 female participants, whether leader or not, included 15 women ages 18-34 (29%). This included 43 NZ European (83%), 3 Asian (5%), 2 Pacifica (3%), 1 Māori (2%), 1 African (2%), 1 other ethnicity (2%), and 1 preferred not to specify (2%). The 47 male participants, whether leader or not, included 8 men ages 18-34 (17%). This included 43 NZ European (91%), 2 Māori (4%), 1 Pacifica (2%), and 1 preferred not to specify (2%). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ruth Moriarty, *Slow Wisdom: Baptist Discernment at the Church Meeting* (Independently published, 2024), 10. “Alongside the 1948 statement, sits the Declaration of Principle (BUGB, 1873, refined in 1904, 1906, and 1938) which each sample church in this study affirms. It states: That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Moriarty, *Slow Wisdom*, “Historically the Baptist church was persecuted for this radical departure from the state church – the Church of England. It is this combination of dissenting theology and historical formation that makes discernment in the Church Meeting critical to Baptist identity and practice” (56). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As we will see below, however, of those 7 instances, only 5 connected theory and practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One non-leader female respondent explained healthy practice in that: “They provide for church-wide discussions on big decisions at church meetings and set up fair voting for this. They promote ‘seeking the mind of Christ together’ by talking about and praying for big issues at Church services and meetings.” The “they” are the “Pastor, Board, Ministry leaders to a smaller degree.” While it seems the respondent knows the right language about Christ’s Lordship, her response contrasted with the second non-leader mention of discerning the mind of Christ. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Moriarty, *Slow* *Wisdom*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Moriarty, *Slow* *Wisdom*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Moriarty, *Slow* *Wisdom*, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Andrew Reyngoud, “New Zealand Baptist Churches in a Time of Change (1989-2019) : An Analysis of the Changes and Variations in Demographics and Their Implication,” accessed November 7, 2024, <https://cdm20012.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p20012coll2/id/34/rec/2>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Moriarty, *Slow* *Wisdom*, 70. Cf. T. Young, “Baptists and the priesthood of believers*.” The Theological Educator Journal of Theology and Ministry* no 5, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Moriarty, *Slow Wisdom*, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Moriarty explains how Baptist churches adopted Robert’s Rules of order. Henry Martyn Robert, an 1863 American Army officer, was exasperated by how meetings were run in his American Baptist church. He thus created a set of rules based upon Jefferson’s rule for the United States Congress that are now widely used to conduct Baptist and other forms of meetings. *Slow Wisdom*, 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Moriarty*, Slow Wisdom*, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Moriarty, *Slow Wisdom*, 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Moriarty, *Slow Wisdom*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Remember this was the response of a leader from the survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)