



Developing an effective integral mission in South Sudan: A competency-based theological model



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Churches in South Sudan operate amid protracted conflict, poverty and institutional fragility, yet most ministerial formation remains classroom centred and weakly connected to contextual practice. This study aimed to identify and prioritise the competencies pastors and church leaders need for effective integral mission in South Sudan and to present a validated competency model that theological educators (in churches and academia) can implement to improve ministerial formation for the context. The study used an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, combining qualitative interviews and a modified e-Delphi panel study to rate and refine competencies across knowledge, character and skills. The study organised competencies into three clusters: knowledge, character, and skills, with clear behavioural descriptors and proficiency levels. Consensus was strongest around spiritual maturity and scriptural fluency and around community-engaged skills. The model translates these into assessable rubrics and development pathways suitable for churches and colleges. Integral mission in fragile contexts requires a braided formation that unites discipleship, contextual theological knowledge and concrete ministerial skills. The resulting model offers a practical template for competency-based theological education in South Sudan and comparable African settings.

Contribution: The article contributes to practical theology and missiology and engages education studies by operationalising competency-based theological education (CBTE) for ministry formation in contexts of fragility.

Keywords: integral mission; South Sudan; pastoral competencies; competency-based theological education; transformational ministry, mixed methods; Delphi; fragile contexts.

Introduction

In a world where churches grapple with the tension between preaching salvation and addressing suffering, *integral mission* reclaims the gospel's wholeness as both proclamation and demonstration. Rooted in the *Micah Declaration on Integral Mission* (2001), this vision affirms that evangelism and social responsibility are inseparable dimensions of Christian witness. Yet, as recent scholarship observes (Pillay 2022:4; Monger 2023; Myers 2011; Padilla et al. 2021), embodying such a holistic faith requires more than theological assent. It demands leaders with the competencies to translate belief into transformative action. This study emerges from that conviction that the effectiveness of integral mission in fragile contexts like South Sudan depends not only on the orthodoxy of the message but on the formation of competent, credible and contextually grounded ministers.

Within South Sudan's complex socio-political landscape (see Braak 2020; eds. Curtis & Dzinesa 2012; Deng 2021; Johnson 2022; Rolandsen & Daly 2016; Wilson 2019), the urgency of integral mission is especially evident. Since independence in 2011, periods of violent instability and humanitarian crises have persisted (Agensky 2019; Nyadera 2018; Okuk 2019). Although churches and faith-based organisations frequently mediate disputes and provide humanitarian services, the impact of these efforts has been mixed, raising questions about ministerial readiness and formation for transformational engagement (Bedigen 2022; Modi, Opongo & Drew Smith 2019; Wilson 2019).

A growing number of African theological educators advocate competency-based theological education (CBTE) to strengthen ministerial effectiveness in challenging contexts (Ilarius 2021; Pillay 2018; Wahl 2013). Competency-based theological education emphasises the integrated formation of knowledge, character and skills aligned to real-world ministry demands (Anderson & Henson 2024; Mulder, Weigel & Collins 2007; Mwangi & De Klerk 2011; Nell 2020; Stiller 2020; Tambwe 2017). In South Sudan, where theological training often contends with

outdated curricula, resource scarcity and conflict-related disruptions (Ilarious 2021), a context-specific competency framework is needed to bridge theory and praxis.

Derived from empirical research in South Sudan, this article identifies the essential competencies for integral mission in this setting and proposes a competency-based model that theological institutions and churches can use to equip pastors and church leaders. By linking theological vision to transformational praxis, the study contributes to strengthening the church's public witness and practical engagement in transformational ministry.

Background and context

South Sudan presents a unique and complex environment shaped profoundly by decades of conflict, poverty, ethnic divisions and political instability. The historical and political journey of South Sudan can be summarised into 10 major periods or events that predate the declaration of the Republic of South Sudan in 2011. Table 1, adapted from Wambugu (2019:22), presents the periods clearly.

South Sudan is a nation inhabited by about 12.58 million people, characterised by significant cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity, including approximately 64 distinct tribes (Okuk 2019:1–2). Christianity is the predominant religion, representing about 60.5% of the population, followed by traditional religions at 33% and Islam at 6.2% (Atuahene 2018:186). Despite its vibrant religious landscape, South Sudan has been deeply marred by internal conflicts that predate its independence and persist today, primarily driven by resource competition, power struggles and communal violence (Ilarious 2021; Rolandsen & Daly 2016:4; Thomas 2015; Wilson 2019).

The role of the church in South Sudanese society has historically extended far beyond spiritual guidance, positioning it as a critical actor in peacebuilding, reconciliation and community development. Religious leaders frequently mediate in local disputes, foster dialogue between conflicting communities and provide humanitarian aid, often stepping into roles neglected by governmental structures (Bedigen 2022; Brown 2008; Poggio 2013; Wilson 2019). However, despite the church's proactive engagement, questions persist

regarding its effectiveness in addressing the deep-rooted social, political and economic crises that continue to affect South Sudanese society (Wilson 2019:4). The gap between the church's potential and its actual impact highlights the urgent need for revitalised theological education (cf. Ilarious 2021) that equips pastors for integral mission. Addressing these challenges requires renewed efforts in theological education that focus on contextual relevance and practical competencies. By providing pastors with knowledge, character and skills suited to South Sudan's realities, the church can multiply its impact and become a central agent of reconciliation, justice and holistic development.

In South Sudan, theological education faces numerous systemic challenges resulting from prolonged periods of conflict and instability. Ilarious (2021) describes the condition of theological institutions in the country as significantly weakened, highlighting issues such as outdated curricula, low enrollment rates, underqualified faculty and severe disruptions caused by ongoing conflict and political instability. This situation reflects a broader dissatisfaction echoed across the African continent concerning traditional theological education systems, which many perceive as disconnected from contemporary societal realities and practical ministry needs (Banda et al. 2020:166; Naidoo 2010:364; Pillay 2018; Wahl 2013:267; Womack, Duncan & Pillay 2020).

In response to these challenges, there is a growing advocacy among African theologians and educators for CBTE, an approach that prioritises the practical application of theological knowledge, character formation and skills development in real-world ministry contexts (Pillay 2018; Wahl 2013). Competency-based theological education moves beyond traditional methods of theological instruction, focusing instead on equipping leaders to meet contextual needs directly through clearly defined competencies (Anderson & Henson 2024; Mwangi & De Klerk 2011; Nell 2020; Stiller 2020; Tambwe 2017; Wolvaardt 2017).

The church in South Sudan thus finds itself at a critical juncture. Given the complex socio-political realities of the country, leaders must develop not only theologically knowledgeable but also possess the necessary skills and character traits to engage effectively in holistic, transformational ministry. Integral mission encompasses the proclamation of the gospel combined with practical demonstrations of compassion and biblical justice (Micah Network 2001; Myers 2011; Pillay 2022). Given that integral mission inherently addresses both spiritual and socio-economic aspects of community transformation, it represents a promising and necessary paradigm for the South Sudanese church's involvement in addressing the myriad challenges facing its communities (Bedigen 2022; Ilarious 2021; Modi et al. 2019).

This research aims to identify the specific competencies required for effective integral mission within the South Sudanese context in order to develop a competency model

TABLE 1: The historical and political timeline of South Sudan.

Year	Event
1820–1881	The Turko-Egyptian period
1881–1898	The Mahdist state
1898–1955	The Anglo-Egyptian condominium rule
1955	Torit Mutiny and the start of the First Civil War
1956	Independence – The Republic of Sudan
1972	Addis Ababa Peace Agreement – End of the First Civil War
1983	SPLA/M – the start of the Second Civil War
2005	The CPA – End of the Second Civil War
2011	Referendum and Independence – The Republic of South Sudan
2013	Eruption of the post-independence conflicts

Source: Wambugu, N., 2019, *Post-conflict security in South Sudan: From liberal peacebuilding to demilitarisation*, I.B. Tauris, London

SPLA, Sudan People's Liberation Army; CPA, Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

for integral mission. It sought to explore how the church and its theological training institutions can strategically equip pastors and church leaders to be more effective agents of transformation, thus significantly enhancing their contribution to community renewal and peacebuilding efforts.

Conceptual framework

Integral mission, transformational ministry and CBTE form the conceptual foundation upon which this research is built. At the core, integral mission advocates a holistic approach that integrates evangelistic proclamation and praxis as inseparable dimensions of the Christian witness. The widely recognised definition from the Micah Declaration (2001) underscores integral mission as 'the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel', emphasising that authentic Christian mission must actively engage both spiritual and practical dimensions of human life (Bosch 2011; Myers 2011; Padilla et al. 2021; Pillay 2022). This holistic framework challenges churches to move beyond only spiritual concerns and actively participate in addressing social, economic, political and environmental issues that affect communities.

While integral mission and transformational ministry provide a compelling theological framework for holistic discipleship, their practical implementation often reveals conceptual and operational tensions. Critics note that the *Micah Declaration's* integrative vision, though widely affirmed, can remain rhetorical when churches lack the theological depth or leadership capacity to translate it into sustained community transformation (Katongole 2011; Sugden 2013). Moreover, the emphasis on social engagement can inadvertently mirror secular development agendas if not grounded in spiritual formation and biblical conviction (Myers 2011). These tensions expose a crucial gap between theological vision and ministerial competence, highlighting the need for intentional formation processes that develop leaders who can embody integral mission through balanced knowledge, character and skills. It is precisely this competency gap that the present study seeks to address through a contextually grounded, competency-based framework for integral mission in South Sudan.

Competencies, in this research, refer to an integrated set of knowledge, skills and character traits that enable effective ministerial engagement in specific contexts. Competency is understood not merely as theoretical knowledge but as practical capacities shaped and refined through theological training and real-life ministry experiences (Mulder et al. 2007; Nell 2020; Shavelson 2010). Competencies encompass cognitive dimensions (such as biblical literacy and contextual awareness), affective dimensions (including empathy, resilience and emotional intelligence) and practical skills (such as conflict resolution, trauma counselling and effective communication). By focusing on competencies, theological education aims to bridge the

gap between theoretical instruction and practical ministry demands (Anderson & Henson 2024; Mwangi & De Klerk 2011; Nell 2020; Stiller 2020; Tambwe 2017; Wolvaardt 2017).

Competency-based theological education thus represents a shift away from traditional pedagogical models towards more contextual, practical and outcome-driven methods of ministerial training. Competency-based theological education prioritises clearly defined competencies aligned closely with actual ministerial contexts and responsibilities (Naidoo 2010; Wahl 2013). Within the challenging context of South Sudan, CBTE offers significant potential, addressing inadequacies in traditional theological education methods by equipping leaders with specific competencies that directly correspond to the real-world challenges of integral mission (Ilarius 2021). Despite its strengths, CBTE is not without limitations. Scholars caution that its focus on measurable outcomes can risk reducing theological formation to technical proficiency rather than spiritual maturity (Naidoo 2010; Nell 2020). Thus, while CBTE offers a promising model for integrating formation and praxis, its success depends on contextual adaptation, ensuring that the pursuit of competencies does not eclipse the formative work of the Spirit or the communal ethos that sustains holistic ministry.

Ultimately, the integration of integral mission, transformational ministry and CBTE provides a conceptual framework for identifying and cultivating the necessary competencies for effective ministry within complex socio-political contexts. For South Sudan, such an approach holds promise not only for enhancing the practical effectiveness of the church's ministries but also for fostering sustained community transformation, peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts amidst ongoing socio-economic and political challenges.

Research methods and design

Design and rationale

An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (see Creswell & Plano Clark 2017) was employed to identify, refine and prioritise competencies for integral mission in South Sudan. Phase 1 comprised qualitative, semi-structured personal interviews to inductively elicit competencies and their rationale from experienced practitioners. Phase 2 used a modified e-Delphi panel to obtain structured expert

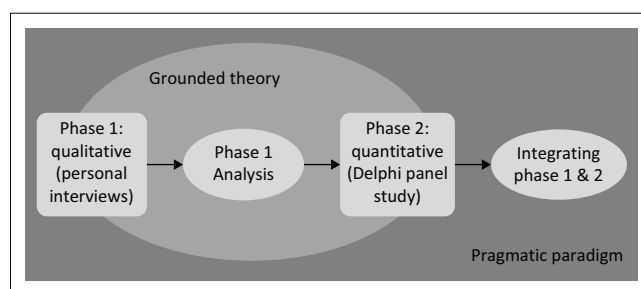


FIGURE 1: The research methodological design.

consensus on the identified competencies. The methodological design is captured in Figure 1.

Setting, sampling and participants

Purposeful and snowball or chain sampling targeted pastors, church leaders, theological educators, and leaders of Christian organisations with demonstrated engagement in integral mission. From an initial frame of 65 potential participants, 20 individuals participated in phase 1 interviews. For phase 2, 25 invitations were sent; 17 experts or practitioners completed the three-round e-Delphi, yielding a total sample of 37 unique participants across the two phases. Demographic variation included a broad spread of ages and ministry tenure, with most participants having more than 20 years of service in church and/or related ministries serving the community.

Data collection procedures

Phase 1 (qualitative interviews) comprised of face-to-face interviews that were audio-recorded and transcribed. An interview protocol covered: (1) demographic and ministry background; (2) views on integral mission in South Sudan; and (3) perceived competencies required for effective practice. A pilot study with five people resulted in the refinement of the questions and interview flow prior to main data collection.

Phase 2 (modified e-Delphi) introduced a three-round e-Delphi process, which was administered through Google Forms, with invitations and reminders delivered through WhatsApp to mitigate connectivity constraints. Round 1 elicited additional competency through open-ended prompts. Rounds 2 and Round 3 asked panellists to rate each competency on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = Not important; 5 = Extremely important). Between rounds, controlled feedback summarised group means, enabling participants to maintain or adjust ratings towards consensus while preserving anonymity.

Data analysis

The qualitative analysis entailed the coding of the interview transcripts by way of an inductive approach supported by ATLAS.ti. Open coding generated an initial pool of competencies, which were then organised within a 'head-heart-hands' schema: knowledge (head), character and/or attitudes (heart), and skills (hands). Definitions and/or descriptors were drafted from in-context quotations; frequency counts recorded the number of interviews in which each competency appeared.

The Delphi analysis involved the exporting of Round 2 and Round 3 data from Google Forms to Microsoft Excel, which were then analysed through International Business Machines (IBM); Statistical Package for Social Studies Statistics (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (means, medians, modes, standard deviations) were computed for each competency and for

11 thematic constructs. Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for the constructs was assessed across both rounds; all Round 3 alphas were acceptable to excellent. Consensus was operationalised through standard deviation: $SD < 0.70$ (High), $0.71-1.00$ (Moderate), > 1.00 (Low). Post-feedback, no competency retained. Low consensus in Round 3.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria (clearance no. T068/21). Informed consent was secured for all participants; rights to withdraw and confidentiality were explained at the outset. Credibility was addressed through methodological triangulation (interviews and Delphi), member checking of interview transcripts, and iterative Delphi feedback to enhance convergence of expert judgements.

Results

Phase 1 (qualitative): Emergent competency set

Interviews with pastors, church leaders, theological educators and leaders of Christian organisations yielded a grounded list of competencies organised in the head-heart-hands schema.

Head (knowledge): Biblical literacy oriented to whole-gospel transformation; theology of the Kingdom and reconciliation; contextual awareness of South Sudan's conflict drivers, customary norms and socio-political dynamics; basic peacebuilding frameworks and reconciliation processes; ethics of public witness and social justice.

Heart (character): New-birth discipleship and spiritual vitality; integrity and financial stewardship; humility and/or servant leadership; compassion and neighbour-love; perseverance and emotional resilience amid protracted adversity; prayerfulness and dependence on God; accountability, teachability and non-discrimination.

Hands (skills): Conflict analysis, mediation and dialogue facilitation; trauma-informed pastoral care and referral; preaching and/or teaching for transformation and behaviour change; community mobilisation and basic project stewardship; inter-ethnic bridge-building; advocacy and public communication; team leadership, interpersonal skills and adaptiveness.

Phase 2 (Delphi): Consensus patterns and ranked outcomes

Across three online rounds, panel ratings converged from Round 2 to Round 3. Internal consistency for the thematic constructs was acceptable to excellent, and post-feedback no item remained in a low consensus band. The highest-rated cluster concentrated in character and core biblical knowledge, with recurrent top items including:

born again or spiritual regeneration, prayerful or dependence on God, knowledge of the Word of God, seek first the Kingdom, accountable, holistic mindset, Christlikeness, understand the message of the Kingdom, concern for others, interpersonal skills, humility, value other people, no discrimination, adaptiveness, and diligence.

Knowledge items related to Scripture and Kingdom theology sat alongside skills items such as conflict resolution and interpersonal competence.

Cross-domain synthesis: How competencies braid in practice

Findings show that effective integral mission arises from braided competencies: (1) knowledge frames and interprets reality; (2) character anchors motives and behaviour under pressure; and (3) skills translate conviction into competent action. For instance, conflict mediation in a cattle-raiding context requires biblical-theological framing of reconciliation (head), empathy and integrity trusted by both sides (heart) and facilitation and/or negotiation techniques (hands). Likewise, trauma care

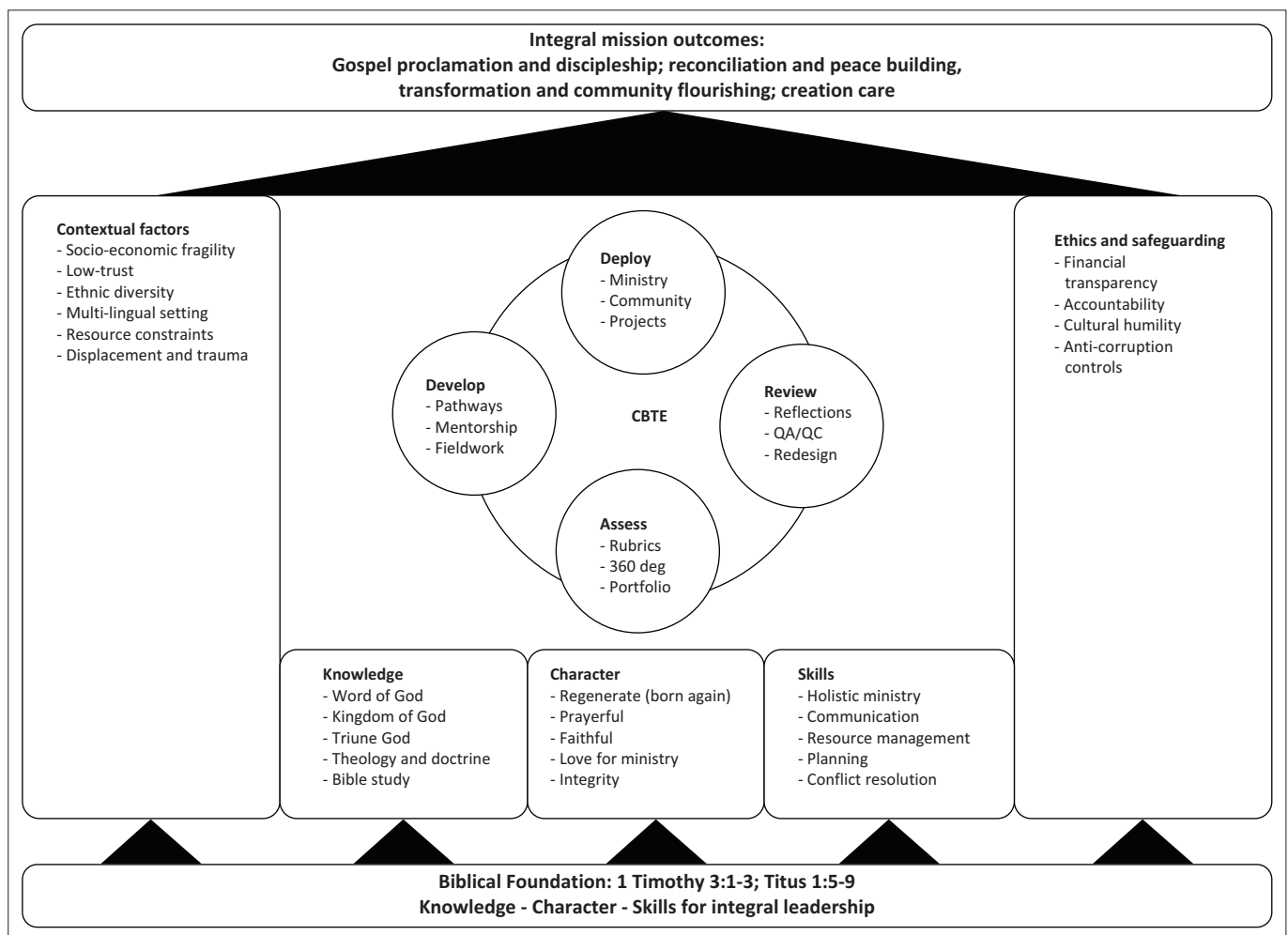
draws on a biblical anthropology of dignity, compassionate presence and basic counselling and/or referral skills.

From findings to a competency-based model for integral mission

The results furnish the building blocks for the Competency-Based Model for Integral Mission (CBMIM). The model aggregates the top-rated items into three domains with behavioural descriptors and performance indicators, suitable for curriculum mapping, practicum design and formative and/or summative assessment in institutions and churches. The Figure 2 captures the competency model developed.

Competency dictionary

The competency dictionary (See Table 2) presents a standardized catalogue of competencies with definitions of knowledge, skills, and characters required for effective integral Mission in South Sudan. It includes behavioral indicators that describe how each competency is demonstrated in practice. The competency dictionary is an essential tool for mapping learning activities and evaluating growth.



CBTE, competency-based theological education; QA, Quality Assurance; QC, Quality Control.

FIGURE 2: Competency-based model for integral mission.

TABLE 2: Competency dictionary.

Domain	Competency	Descriptor (behavioural summary)
Knowledge	Word of God	Handles Scripture accurately; applies it to personal and communal life; resists syncretism.
Knowledge	Kingdom of God	Articulates Kingdom themes (justice, reconciliation, shalom) and applies them to public life.
Knowledge	Triune God	Confesses and/or teaches orthodox Trinitarian faith; models unity-in-diversity.
Knowledge	Theology and doctrine	Integrates <i>missio Dei</i> , stewardship, creation–fall–redemption in ministry design.
Knowledge	Bible study	Uses inductive or exegetical methods suited to oral and/or literate audiences; trains others.
Character	Regenerate (born again)	Evidences Spirit-wrought transformation; repentance, humility, love.
Character	Prayerful	Practices disciplined personal or corporate prayer; discerns God's leading.
Character	Faithful	Reliable, persevering, covenant-keeping under pressure.
Character	Love for ministry	Serves self-sacrificially; empathic; people centred.
Character	Integrity	Honest, transparent, accountable; above reproach in finances and/or relationships.
Skills	Holistic ministry	Integrates proclamation with social action; designs contextual diaconal responses.
Skills	Listening	Elicits stories and/or needs; reflects back; adapts plans to local wisdom.
Skills	Communication	Preaches or teaches clearly; writes reports; communicates across cultures.
Skills	Resource management	Budgets; mobilises resources; reports transparently; mitigates bias or favouritism.
Skills	Organisation & planning	Sets goals; coordinates teams; adapts plans amid volatility.
Skills	Conflict resolution	Mediates disputes; promotes reconciliation; de-escalates tensions.
Skills	Discipleship and/or mentoring	Multiplies leaders; coaches; structures long-term growth pathways.
Skills	Community bridging	Draws communities together across ethnic and/or denominational lines.

Proficiency levels and rating anchors

The proficiency rubric (see Table 3) defines assessment at four levels – Novice, Emerging, Proficient and Exemplary – using behavioural indicators that are observable in practical ministry settings rather than relying on abstract self-reports. Anchors align heuristically with the Delphi means (e.g. competencies averaging ≥ 4.50 display mentor-level behaviour under pressure with influence beyond the local setting). Verification includes artefacts such as sermon manuscripts, community maps, facilitation plans, meeting records, financial samples, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) snapshots and coaching logs. Input from mentors, peers and congregants, along with regular calibration sessions, enhances reliability. The rubric supports CBTE by promoting advancement based on demonstrated competence rather than seat time.

Discussion

Alignment with integral mission and competency-based theological education literature

The study confirms that pastoral effectiveness in South Sudan depends on the integration of character, biblical literacy and peacebuilding, thus supporting the Lausanne vision of a whole gospel that unites proclamation and praxis. Yet it also critiques Western assumptions in both integral mission and

TABLE 3: Proficiency rubric (four levels).

Level	Label	Behavioural anchor	Indicative mean alignment
4	Exemplary or mentor	Models the competency under pressure; coaches others; impact beyond own setting.	≥ 4.50
3	Proficient or practising	Consistently demonstrates in varied situations with minimal support.	4.10–4.49
2	Emerging or developing	Performs in familiar situations; needs guidance for complexity.	3.50–4.09
1	Novice or basic	Understands concept; inconsistent performance; requires close supervision.	< 3.50

Note: Scoring guidance – Use multiple evidence types (artefacts, observations, interviews, 360° feedback). Rate each competency independently; record evidence to avoid halo effects.

CBTE by arguing that, in fragile contexts, moral credibility and spiritual resilience (not merely observable outcomes) define competence. While CBTE offers a useful framework for articulating and assessing learning outcomes, it must be re-contextualised to embrace African communal formation and the spiritual dimensions of ministry that resist quantification.

South Sudan's contextual distinctives

The findings highlight trauma, displacement and institutional fragility as defining features of South Sudan's ministerial environment, requiring trauma-informed care, conflict mediation and community mobilisation as core competencies. This challenges utilitarian and managerial leadership models often promoted in global CBTE discourse and exposes a discipleship deficit rooted in overly cognitive theological education. Pastoral credibility, therefore, is not merely a private virtue but a public theological necessity, positioning resilience, prayerfulness and moral integrity as foundational for sustainable witness in fragile societies.

Biblical-theological consonance

The prioritised character competencies reflect continuity with biblical qualifications for church leaders (Tim 1 3; Tt 1) while broadening their meaning for post-conflict contexts, where virtues like hospitality and self-control acquire civic significance. Knowledge and skills in biblical interpretation and reconciliation express the church's vocation to embody orthodoxy, orthopathy and orthopraxy in balanced harmony. The findings thus critique reductionist readings that separate spirituality from social transformation and commend a pastoral identity that unites doctrinal fidelity with credible public engagement.

Pedagogical translation

Competency-based theological education principles (*clear competency descriptors, scaffolded learning, and authentic assessment*) provide a promising vehicle for implementing these findings, but the research cautions against equating measurable performance with holistic formation. In South Sudan, effective learning depends on mentoring, peer accountability and reflective practice that cultivate inner transformation and community responsibility. Hence, a contextually grounded CBTE must combine structured

outcomes with flexible, relational pedagogies that sustain learning through apprenticeship, mentoring and digital collaboration amid resource constraints.

Limitations and transferability

Although the study's mixed-methods design enhances credibility, the sample's urban bias and reliance on self-report limit generalisability. Nevertheless, the convergence across methods supports analytical generalisation to other fragile or post-conflict settings. The competencies identified offer transferable insights for theological education reform across Africa, provided contextual adaptation is ensured. Future research should examine longitudinal impacts of competency-based formation on ministry effectiveness and community transformation to strengthen the model's practical and theoretical validity.

Implications of research

For theological institutions

Some implications for theological institutions, are:

- Curriculum mapping: Align modules to the CBMIM domains; specify outcomes that integrate head-heart-hands and map assessments to each descriptor.
- Practice-rich formation: Require field education in peacebuilding, mediation practicums and trauma-healing placements with structured supervision.
- Assessment and quality: Use multi-source evidence (self, mentor, community) and longitudinal portfolios to verify competency growth.
- Faculty development: Equip lecturers in CBTE design, conflict transformation and trauma-informed pedagogy; incentivise praxis-scholar partnerships.

For churches and networks

There are also implications for churches and networks, namely:

- Cohort discipleship: Establish small-group, mentor-guided formation ('pastors of pastors') that cultivates prayer, integrity and accountable love.
- Conflict and reconciliation ministries: Launch mediation clinics and peace circles led by trained facilitators; integrate reconciliation liturgies and restitution practices.
- Trauma-healing pathways: Train lay caregivers, create referral networks and host laments/healing retreats that link Scripture and psychosocial care.
- Community mobilisation: Form action teams for livelihoods and youth engagement; pair theological reflection with concrete projects.

For partners and policy makers

Notable implications for partners and policy makers, include:

- Collaborative platforms: Link seminaries, denominations and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) for shared practicum sites and co-taught modules in peacebuilding and public theology.

- Resource localisation: Commission materials in local languages and idioms; document indigenous peacemaking practices within a biblical frame.
- Monitoring and learning: Track outcomes not only at the learner level but also community-level changes (e.g. reduced disputes, restored relationships, survivor support uptake).

Conclusion

This study set out to identify the competencies required for effective integral mission in South Sudan and to translate these into a competency-based model suitable for theological education and church leadership formation. In a context marked by protracted conflict, fragile institutions and deep social wounds, the findings demonstrate that ministerial effectiveness depends on a braided integration of knowledge, character and skills. The CBMIM articulated here consolidates that integration, offering a practical frame for curriculum design, supervised practice and assessment that aligns theological vision with on-the-ground realities.

The study's contributions are threefold. Empirically, it provides a ranked and consensus-tested set of competencies grounded in South Sudanese experience. Theologically, it affirms that formation for integral mission requires the mutual reinforcement of orthodoxy (true doctrine), orthopathy (right affections and virtues) and orthopraxy (faithful practice). Pedagogically, it demonstrates how competency-based formation can be operationalised through clear descriptors, practicum pathways, mentoring structures and evidence-based assessment. Notably, the prominence of character – conversational vitality, integrity, humility, accountability, perseverance – highlights that spiritual and moral credibility is indispensable for public witness in fragile settings; knowledge and skills bear fruit sustainably only when anchored in such character.

The CBMIM encourages institutions and churches to use curriculum mapping, faculty development, field education partnerships and multi-source assessment with community input. Main areas are trauma-informed pastoral care, conflict mediation, peacebuilding literacy and community mobilisation. Integrating these skills into cohort discipleship and mentored practice can help leaders more effectively promote the gospel and foster social healing and neighbourly love.

The study acknowledges limitations related to sampling scope and potential response biases, and it recommends further work on instrument validation, longitudinal tracking of competency growth and community-level outcome evaluation. Comparative research across other African and Global South contexts would refine transferability and surface additional contextual distinctives. Even so, the coherence of the present results across qualitative and e-Delphi phases supports the CBMIM as an actionable guide for formation.

A competency-based approach – grounded in theology, adapted to context and proven in practice – can help South Sudanese pastors and church leaders become effective reconcilers, teachers and servants. By aligning training with these competencies, churches and seminaries can more fully demonstrate the gospel's message and transformative impact in their communities.

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Competing interests

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CRedit authorship contribution

David A. Okeny: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Jerry Pillay: Data curation, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly accessible from https://researchdata.up.ac.za/articles/dataset/Integral_mission_and_competency-based_theological_education/29996236

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