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Mechanisms for Intra-Ecclesial Conflict Transformation for Christian Unity in South East Kenya Field of Seventh-Day Adventists

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The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church in South East Kenya Field (SEKEF) consistently witnesses internal conflicts that affect the unity and integrity of its membership. This study investigated church-based mechanisms for internal conflict transformation for Christian unity in the SEKEF of Seventh-day Adventists. It argues that internal church conflicts, no matter how painful they are, have positive effects on the life of its members. However, this depends on the mechanisms used to address them. The study was informed by a transformative mediation theory proposed by Robert Baruch Bush and Joseph Folger in 1964 that focuses not just on solving existing problems but transforming the relationships and interactions that cause the conflict; it empowers congregants and leaders to regard conflicts as an opportunity for growth. A phenomenological approach, which looks at the lived experiences of individuals was used. The target population was 280, with a sample size of 162 participants determined by the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) tabulation formula. Censuses, purposive, and simple random sampling techniques were used to select participants who received questionnaires and participated in semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions for the collection of data. Thematic, content, and narrative analysis techniques guided data analysis. The study found out mediation and negotiation, structured dialogues and listening sessions, pastoral care and counselling, training and capacity building, engagement in theological reflection and doctrinal clarification, and leadership development and structural reforms as important church-based mechanisms for internal conflict transformation for the unity of the SDA church SEKEF. It is recommended that the church not use court litigation processes that are not desired by the Christian faith.

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inevitable and necessary feature that defines human relationships within and between communities. The church, being part of the community, is not immune to this reality; a position that is held by various studies. For instance, Folarin and Adelakun (2016) and Page (2008) postulate that the presence of conflicts is part of the church as a social institution, which also creates an opportunity to assess the real character of believers and the future of the church. This is reflected in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:10, NIV), where the early church had experienced internal conflicts as the Jews who spoke Hellenistic (Greek) complained of unfair distribution of food as their widows were being discriminated against by the Jews who spoke Aramaic. However, the important issue is that whenever conflicts happen in the church, what matters is the manner and mechanisms used to address them. Failure to transform the internal conflicts of the church into something positive makes the church an inauthentic instrument of unity for social change.

From a global perspective, in the US, a study by Hicks (2010) indicated, the Southern Baptist Church in Central Florida, which was doing well in the spiritual and numerical growth, was destroyed by internal conflicts. The church factions, instead of amicably solving their internal leadership-related conflicts, one section of the faithful chose to

forcefully remove the pastor from the church. This led to further splits and enmity among church believers.

In the old Yugoslavia, a study by Craig (2003) informs that ethnic cleansing conflicts that were experienced also affected the internal reality of the Church, with a massive destruction of many Orthodox Churches and Monasteries. The unfortunate thing is that the Church leadership, instead of internally resolving the conflict among its membership using church mechanisms, preferred the intervention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which is a secular political and military organisation, giving the conflict a political tone and solution. But this did not mend the relationships of conflicting church groups, but instead created more hatred.

In South Africa, a study by Lewis (2007) points out that the Anglican Bishop Colenso in Natal, because of his ecclesiological argument for universalism and his radical theological declaration that the Pentateuch was unhistorical, led to the breakup of the Anglican Church from the Church of England. This affected the unity of the entire Anglican Church, which has not been resolved to date.

In Kenya, a study by Magonde (2012) informs that Kenya, despite being predominantly Christian, the Church, in the face of conflicts, which affect even its members, fails to speak in one voice. For

instance, an empirical study by Gathuki (2015) informs that before the establishment of the Christian Church International (CCI) in Kiria-ini, due to internal conflicts, instead of working together, the Church members chose to split forming other Churches, while some churches were also closed leaving their members in hopelessness and despair wondering from church to church in search of Christian identity.

While in the SDA church, a study by Gathuki (2015) indicates how the church is constantly rocked by internal conflicts. For instance, the Maxwell church (Nairobi Central Church) in 2019 experienced serious internal conflicts. But, the top SDA church leadership, instead of taking the mantle to positively resolve the internal conflicts ailing the members remained silent leaving the courts to take up the process to resolve them (The Star Newspaper, 2019; Citizen Weekly, 2019; Ondieki, 2019; Otieno, 2019; Kenya Law, 2021; Obebo, 2022). Furthermore, Gathuki (2015) explains that in other regions, the SDA Church, instead of amicably and jointly transforming experienced conflicts that ail the various churches, erroneously resorts to church splits as a solution. However, this, in effect, leads to the loss of members to other churches or simply leaves the faithful to go back to the lives they once lived before they joined the Church.

The same situation is replicated in South East Kenya Field (SEKEF), where studies by Ondieki (2019) and Obebo (2022) report on the persistent internal conflicts that have led to violent confrontation among SDA Church members. Conflicts that compel the church to resort to non-ecclesial approaches like court (litigation) processes and the police to resolve and manage them. Also, the Church leadership misconstrues splits to be the solution. For instance, studies by Otieno (2019), Abuga (2020), Obebo (2022), and Mutiso (2022) underline that in the region, conflicts which are of an administrative nature led to the split of the Church into two new Churches, conflicting stations, namely Nyamonyo and Gotichaki. The unfortunate

thing is that it is common to see the church busy preaching peace and reconciling communities from the outward-looking approaches, while disregarding the inward approaches. Using non-ecclesial measures and agents that do not properly understand the nature and organisation of the Church divides even more the membership of the Church, and disrupts Church operations. The pointed gaps informed this study to investigate Church-based mechanisms for internal conflict transformation for Christian unity in SEKEF of Seventh-day Adventists.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Conflicts are an inevitable and a necessary feature that define human interactions within the wider community and the church, despite their spiritual and role modelling, is not immune to them. While the Christian faith emphasises unity achieved through reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace-building, the Seventh-day Adventist church in South East Kenya Field continues to experience internal conflicts ranging from leadership struggles and doctrinal disagreements to interpersonal tensions that adversely affect its unity and spiritual vitality. Such conflicts stay unsettled or inadequately addressed. Furthermore, there is little, if not, non-empirical research on Church-based internal mechanisms used by the SDA Church to transform its existing conflicts. Instead, the church sometimes chooses court litigation measures (Ondieki, 2019; Obebo, 2022), forceful eviction from the church those perceived to cause conflicts, silence on internal conflicts, suppression, informal and ad-hoc schemes that lack a structured processes, or even totally ignore its internal conflicts and leaving them to the police officers to resolve and manage them. But such measures do not properly understand the nature and organisation of the Church, thus disrupting Church operations; they obstruct effective transformation of internal-church conflicts and ravage the unity of the Church membership. Therefore, this study sought to investigate and analyse church-based mechanisms

for internal conflict transformation for Christian unity of Seventh-day Adventists in SEKEF.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The dynamic and evolving nature of intra-ecclesial conflicts calls for dynamic and multi-faceted modalities for their transformation. To this Kreider, et al (2005) posit that the complexity of the nature of intra-ecclesial conflicts point to the fact that there is no quick fix in handling church conflicts and their transformation is a process that necessitate knowledge and skills that engages multifaceted dynamics like relationships, interests, unit of intent, and discourses (Aderayo & Olayinka, 2016). Katz (2017) informs that any mishandling of institutional conflicts invites negative impacts on the functioning of the same institution in the aspects of output, influence, quality, credibility, and so on. The mistake many make in dealing with conflicts is to jump to predetermined solutions to enforce desired peace without actually understanding the conflict itself.

Wehr (2018) explains that analysis as a mechanism for conflict transformation represents a holistic conflict-mapping transformation strategy that encompasses the main elements of the conflict, such as its context, stakeholders, causes, goals and interests, dynamics, constraining beliefs, functions, and regulation, as well as its consequences. McSwain (2013) emphasises that failure to recognise the reality of conflicts is a faulty mechanism used by those who are either not interested in resolving and converting the dispute or who fear it, and therefore play the evasive approach of avoidance.

Winslade and Monk (2000) assert that communication and open dialogues are an important mechanism that “speaks” those involved in the conflict into existence and constitute their personhood. Whenever conflicting parties are enabled to freely communicate and dialogue, it leads to the acknowledgement of the different narratives at play in their given conflict, thereby

creating new possibilities to discover the nature of the conflict for change. This makes them co-actors in the construction of their divisive narratives (Burr, 2006).

Pope Francis (2013) explains that conflict should not be ignored or concealed; rather, it has to be acknowledged, confronted, and that parties should desire in a collaborative spirit to resolve the conflict and to make a link in the chain of the new life process for the unity of the church and their individual development. Collaboration offers the Church a collegial way that has the ability to transform the existing internal conflicts. A position held by Bercovitch and Kadayifchi-Orellana (2009) who posit that collaboration of religious leaders with Churches, government, and non-governmental organisations is necessary in the prevention of conflicts.

Tracy & Spradlin (1994) inform that in faith-based conflict transformative efforts, negotiation and mediation are central since they chant the vision of the church for unity and increase common ground based on religious principles. Reiterating this position, Harvard Business School (2013) asserts that negotiation and mediation bring disputing parties to cooperate for the achievement of maximum mutual benefit. Naganag (2019) posits that visionary church elders and church leaders play a crucial role in mediating disputes between congregation members. Such a role includes mediation, reconciliation, persuasion, and also making decisions that are respected by the disputing parties, as those decisions are made collegially. Whereas Appleby (2000) sustains that reconciliation, which is at the centre of religious teachings for the unity of society, overcomes alienating relationships between humans. In every conflict, it is important to take into account that neither of the parties involved is a winner or a loser.

From a spiritual perspective, Miller (2013) holds that the Bible is the primary source of Christian literature concerning conflict resolution and

transformation; it entails spiritual disciplines, which are Christian value-based channels that help to build the character and life of those involved in conflicts within the church. This view is supported by Whitney (2014), who posits that spiritual disciplines are practices that direct people to the opportunity for spiritual growth and religious experience of the value of God in their lives.

While Carr-Chellman and Kroth (2017) sustain that for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation, *Koinonia ecclesiology* is key, Ahola (2018) asserted that throughout the New Testament, *koinonia* ecclesiology stresses communion, being together, common grounds, sharing, worshipping and participating together; they are fundamental elements that represent the relationship of church members. Picking the element of sharing meals, Purnell and Jenkins (2013) inform that around the table meal, the existing conflicts are transformed into a community affair, thereby decreasing the possibility of them escalating into a fight; it further encourages forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. While Sweet (2014) asserts that if the church wants to handle conflict in constructive and transformative ways, it should be done around the table of shared meals where forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing are realised in the spirit of love. The same applies to community worship as it enhances fellowship of members, which is not just an earthly reciprocal fellowship, but a fellowship wherein we pass beyond our separate selves into unity with one-self, the other, and with God. Communal worship unifies the fellowship of congregants, where the divisive and inimical comportment of the members is set aside for the rebuilding of unity with one another and the Triune God.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigated church-based mechanisms for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation in the

Seventh-day Adventist church in South East Kenya Field. It employed a qualitative research approach. The study was informed by a transformative mediation theory proposed by Robert Baruch Bush and Joseph Folger in 1994. The choice of this theory was informed by its focus not just on solving existing problems but transforming the relationships and interactions that cause the conflict. The theory empowers congregants and leaders to regard conflicts as an opportunity for growth. A phenomenological approach, which looks at the lived experiences of participants, was used. The target population was 280, with a sample size of 162 participants determined by the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) tabulation formula. Censuses, purposive, and simple random sampling techniques were used to select 15 church union leaders, 8 pastors, 25 church elders, 10 deacons and deaconesses, and 104 church members to participate in the study. Three data collection tools: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focused group discussions for the collection of data were used. The preference for these three instruments was informed by Kumar (2014), Cozby & Bates (2012), and Creswell (2021), who recommend the use of more than one tool to collect data since it evades bias by enabling cross-checking the credibility of the same data collected with the implied tools. Thematic, content, and narrative analysis techniques guided data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The focus of this study was to investigate the mechanisms used by the SDA church in SEKEF for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation for the unity of the church. The study sought to find out if the under-listed mechanisms are used by the SDA church in SEKEF. The results are as illustrated in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Mechanisms for Intra-ecclesial Conflicts Transformation in SEKEF

Item	A	SA	N	D	SD	Total
The church uses Mediation and Negotiation in intra-ecclesial conflict transformation	R-15 %-15.5	07 7.2	10 10.3	55 56.7	10 10.3	97 100%
Structured dialogues and listening sessions are used as an intra-ecclesial conflict transformation mechanism	R-60 %-61.9	14 14.4	5 5.2	11 11.3	7 7.2	97 100%
Counselling as a pastoral care is a priority in the church for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation	R-23 %-23.7	3 3.1	5 5.2	58 59.8	8 8.2	97 100%
The church invests in training and capacity building of members as a viable mechanism for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation	R-15 %-15.5	7 7.2	6 6.2	56 57.7	13 13.4	97 100%
The church engages in theological reflection and doctrinal clarification for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation	R-66 %-68.0	5 5.2	10 10.3	13 13.4	3 3.1	97 100%
The church employs leadership development and structural reforms	R-54 %-55.7	10 10.3	6 6.2	16 16.5	11 11.3	97 100%
Inter-generational and cross-ministry collaboration is used	R-61 %-62.9	3 3.1	8 8.2	16 16.5	10 10.3	97 100%
The church uses community projects and social engagement as an intra-ecclesial conflict transformation mechanism	R-65 %-67.0	7 7.2	4 4.1	12 12.4	9 9.3	97 100%

Key: R – Respondents, %-Percentage

From table 1.1, on the mechanism of mediation and negotiation, the field findings in the level of agreements and disagreements indicated that 22 (22.7%) respondents were of the position that the SDA church in SEKEF employs this mechanism, 10 (10.3%) were undecided, while an overwhelming majority of 65 (67.0%) of the respondents were of the contrary opinion. Adding to the voice of the majority who held that the SDA church in SEKEF does not use mediation and negotiations in transforming intra-ecclesial conflicts, participants from the interviews informed:

The SDA church seems not to be aware of the importance of mediation and negotiations in settling its internal conflicts. This is reflected in various incidents where the church uses court litigation mechanisms. There are various cases in court where churches are forcefully closed and pastors and church elders are not allowed to preside over church services (P13).

When conflicts arise in the church, those behind them think that the only way to resolve them is through physical confrontation, where church property is destroyed and people are injured, and churches are closed. This shows no one is willing to go for peaceful and relational ways of handling conflicts in the church (P22).

The field data is explicit of the fact that the SDA church is losing out on the benefits of mediation and negotiation in intra-ecclesial conflict transformation. Such benefits include the involvement of a neutral third party (a pastor, church elder, a trained mediator) who facilitates a dispute between the conflicting parties to help them reach mutually agreeable solutions. Instead, and unfortunately, some church members opt for litigation processes, which ruin interpersonal relationships and deepen the resentment between the conflicting parties. Losing out on the benefits of mediation and negotiation for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation means that the SDA church in SEKEF is not adhering to the fundamental

biblical exigency that builds on reconciliation principles (Mt. 18:15-17; 2Cor. 5:18-19, NIV), where it is important to involve the second and third parties as witnesses in seeking reconciliation. Mediation and negotiation are geared toward reducing hostility and misunderstandings among the church members by promoting empathy and active listening of each other in addressing their conflicts. And equally, the church is losing respect and relationships among the conflicting parties, which is a fundamental goal of mediation. Ultimately, the church is losing out on collaborative problem-solving and church unity that is fostered by mediation and negotiation.

In support of the field data, Boege (2006) asserts that the inclusion of all relevant parties is a strength in conflict transformation. While Burr (2006) explains that in the mediation and negotiation process, those in conflict are co-actors in the construction of their divisive narratives. A view that is also supported by Kriesberg (2008), who holds that taking into consideration all conflict-related matters allows the formulation of suitable ends for all involved parties, as they provide direction for the methods used in the transformation of the conflicts in question.

On the item of structured dialogues within the SDA church in SEKEF as a conflict transformational mechanism, questionnaire responses in table 1.1 demonstrated an overwhelming majority of 74 (76.2%) respondents in support of the postulate, 5 (5.2%) were neutral, and 18 (18.6%) did not support the position that the church in SEKEF employs structured dialogues and listening sessions in transforming its internal conflicts. Resonating with the views of the majority in support, a respondent in the interviews informed:

The SDA church holds so many structured dialogues, in their interactive ways, giving a chance to those in conflicts to air out their issues, but the unfortunate thing is that conflicting parties have rigid and domineering

positions, and they do not listen to each other nor speak to each other. This means there is a lack of dialogue enforcement mechanisms. The failure of constructive dialogues leads to parties opting for court processes that do not fully understand the operations of the church to settle their disputes (P47).

Structured dialogues are important in the transformation of intra-ecclesial conflicts; however, the problem sometimes is that those facilitating them are not neutral and skilled; some are biased, rendering the whole process unfruitful (P18).

The field data, despite recognising the beauty of structured dialogues, point out that the leadership of the SDA church in SEKEF is using this tool, but the problem is the uncompromising positions of those in dispute and conflict. But the verbatim data, despite acknowledging the importance of structured dialogues, raises concerns of un-neutrality and un-skillfulness of those to facilitate dialogues, which leads to mistrust and some opting to pull out. The field data also points out a lack of enforcement mechanisms to ensure that dialogues are considered a church based tool for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation. These challenges render dialogues unfruitful. Overcoming these issues requires skilled facilitation, commitment to trust, and clear church based enforcement mechanisms and frameworks that ensure all voices are properly heard.

Structured dialogues among church members are an interactive mechanism which helps in identifying areas of agreement and disagreement while creating options for future interactions, as they consist of working for relationships between the affected and non-affected church groups. They promote understanding by encouraging an attitude of listening without judgment or immediate rebuttal. This prevents the escalation of conflict by reducing emotional outbursts through set guidelines. Whenever parties freely communicate and dialogue, it leads to the acknowledgement of the different

narratives at play within any given conflict, thereby creating new possibilities where disputing parties can discover themselves for a fruitful change in the church. This enhances the unity of disputants and the affected members since it provides a profound understanding of the conflict, while creating a platform to address issues and come up with the needed changes at the level of the deeper relational patterns.

The field findings and the discussions around them are consistent with Lederach (2003), who posits that dialogues and proper communication reinforce one's capacity to reach out to others with tolerance, openness, compassion, especially those from whom one is in dispute with (recognition), thus bringing a constructive change to the individual and society. And also with Winslade and Monk (2000) who sustain that communication and open dialogues "speak" those involved in the conflict into existence and constitute their personhood.

Field data on the counseling of victims of intra-ecclesial conflicts as a conflict transformation showed that 26 (26.8%) of the respondents supported the view that the SDA church in SEKEF employs counseling as a pastoral care tool for those affected by intra-ecclesial conflicts, 3 (5.2%) were undecided, while a majority of 66 (68.0%) did not agree on the postulate that the church employs counseling as a pastoral care tool for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation. A participant in support of the thesis informed:

Counseling is a mechanism that fosters emotional intelligence and spiritual maturity in handling conflicts; it is a personal or group tool that reduces unnecessary conflicts in the church. However, this is not a priority in the SDA church in its resolve to transform its intra-ecclesial conflicts that continue the ravage the unity of its members in SEKEF (P21).

The field data is explicit that the counselling mechanism plays a crucial role by providing guidance, emotional support, and biblical wisdom

to affected individuals and groups. This is because many intra-ecclesial conflicts stem from unresolved emotional wounds like past hurts, misunderstandings, unmet expectations, and so forth. There are issues where, on one hand, one-on-one counselling sessions help individuals to process their emotions and make a move toward healing and reconciliation in the church. On the other hand, group therapy or counselling within the church provides spaces for collective healing and reconciliation.

The study noted that the higher number of those not supporting the use of counselling as an intra-ecclesial conflict transformation tool showed that it is a matter of great concern that the SDA church in SEKEF undermines this tool. The church is challenged to consider pastoral counselling as an important tool that can address systemic conflict-related issues in the church and prevent future conflicts as it uncovers the underlying causes that cause them.

On the component of training and capacity building of the church membership as a viable tool for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation, data from the field illustrated that 22 (22.7%) of those who answered the questionnaire were in support, 6 (6.2%) were undecided, while an overwhelming majority of 69 (71.1%) were of the position that the SDA church in SEKEF does not invest in training and capacity building of its members for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation. This high rate of those in opposition to the postulate was echoed by some participants in the interviews:

The church does not train its members for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation; rather, its mission is to preach peace, love, unity, and other values of the Kingdom to the members. It is not the expectation of the church to have intra-ecclesial conflicts, for it to train its members on how to transform them (P23).

For the whole time I have been in SEKEF, we have had several peace-building training

workshops to enable church leaders and other members of the church to handle conflict matters with maturity. However, the training and capacity building are only held when there are conflicts. In the absence of conflicts, they are never held (P11).

The field findings point to the fact that the SDA church does not directly invest in the training of its members for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation; it appears not to be the concern of the church in SEKEF. However, this is losing out the fact that training church members and leaders is a powerful tool to address and transform internal conflicts. When members are equipped with the right knowledge, skills, and biblical principles, they are in a better position to properly handle disputes in a manner that promotes unity within the church. Training enhances skills necessary for the transformation of church conflicts, especially in mediation, negotiation, and problem-solving, which all work to de-escalate tensions and resolve disputes peacefully. Training promotes biblical principles, such as forgiveness, humility, reconciliation, and strengthens leadership for better management of crises within the church membership.

Training and capacity building, therefore, promote unity and teamwork where church members and their leadership learn how to work together despite their differences in opinions, cultural affiliations, and backgrounds, or personal interests. In training, members are taught how to express their concerns in a respectful and solution-focused manner, and also help leaders receive criticism with humility, respond responsibly, and address conflicts constructively.

On theological reflection and doctrinal clarification, the field data held an overwhelming majority of 71 (73.2%) in support of the postulate that the SDA church in SEKEF engages in theological reflection and doctrinal clarification for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation, 10 (10.3%) were not sure, while 16

(16.5%) were of the contrary opinion. In support of the theme, participants in the interviews informed:

The SDA church prioritises the Holy Scriptures as the source of its mission; every action of the church is led by the Word of God. This is why in every gathering always there must be a reading of the Bible verse (P16).

Ephesians 4:2-3 reminds us to be humble and gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Pastors and church leaders preach against conflicts in the church; conflicts destroy the church (P17).

Intra-ecclesial conflicts do arise due to misunderstandings of theology, doctrinal differences, and misinterpretation of scripture. This calls for theological reflection and doctrinal clarification to address these conflicts as they provide a clear and unified understanding of faith, promoting peace, and strengthening church unity. Theological and doctrinal clarification addresses misunderstandings, reinforces unity, guides members toward reconciliation, and prevents the spread of misinformation or doctrinal errors that can divide church members; all in the context of a shared understanding of core religious beliefs.

For instance, clarified biblical teachings on love, forgiveness, and reconciliation help members prioritise unity over personal preferences, which all help in resolving disputes in a way that aligns with biblical truth. When leaders apply sound theology and doctrines, they are enabled to manage conflicts with wisdom and integrity. Further theological clarity ensures that leadership decisions reflect the church's mission rather than personal biases or external pressures. And it prevents legalism in religion since conflicts sometimes arise when persons or groups impose legalistic rules or extreme theological views onto others. The mistake many make in dealing with intra-ecclesial conflicts is to jump to theological and doctrinal predetermined solutions as enforcement of desired peace without

actually understanding the internal conflicts themselves.

Thus, engaging in theological and doctrinal discussions helps to embrace scriptural guidance and explore appropriate mechanisms that bring transformation of existing intra-ecclesial conflicts. They challenge believers to examine their faith, study scripture more deeply, and re-evaluate traditions or practices. And when conflicts within the church are viewed from a biblical and prayer perspective, it leads to a deeper understanding of God's will and fosters personal and communal spiritual growth.

The field findings and the discussions are in tandem with Probst *et al* (2000), who underscored the importance of knowledge that informs the whole body of cognition and skill in conflict transformation. And also with Aderayo and Olayinka (2016), who hold that the transformation of intra-ecclesial conflicts is a process that necessitates knowledge that engages multifaceted dynamics like relationships, interests, unit of intent, and discourses. There is no conflict transformation without the knowledge of what that conflict entails before any attempt to transform it.

On the constituent of leadership development and structural reforms as a mechanism, the questionnaire field data demonstrated that 64 (66%) of the respondents were of the view that the SDA church in SEKEF is committed to leadership development and structural reforms, 6 (6.2%) were undecided, and 27 (27.8%) had a contrary opinion. The position of the majority was echoed in the interviews, a participant opined:

The church is keen to ensure that leaders are developed in the church. Leadership workshops and seminars are regularly held to equip leaders. Furthermore, the church is involving youth in the leadership of the church. The involvement of the youth in leadership is a commitment of the church leadership to structural reforms that bring inclusivity and

dynamism within the leadership of the church (P16).

Structural reforms, especially in the leadership of the church, are a practical way of improving decision-making organs of the church, increasing transparency and innovation in church affairs (P8).

The field data underscore leadership development and structural reforms as a conflict transformation mechanism that fosters transparency in governance, improves decision-making, promotes servant leadership and a culture of reconciliation. Implementing changes in leadership structures improves power imbalances and prevents future conflicts, while encouraging participatory governance and inclusivity. In leadership development, church leaders are trained and equipped to handle disputes with wisdom, humility, and promote ethical principles necessary in leadership. In essence, leadership development encourages a servant leadership mentality within the church. A well-structured church with trained leaders is more connected or united, and committed as members trust their leadership.

The study also looked at inter-generational and cross-ministry collaboration as a mechanism for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation. The questionnaire field findings showed a majority of 64 (66.0%) in support of the thesis that the SDA church in SEKEF uses inter-generational and cross-ministry collaboration as a conflict resolution strategy, 8 (8.2%) were neutral, while 21 (21.6%) had a contrary opinion.

We hold inter-generational worship where young people are allowed to animate church services. There are also social events where ministries interact informally, thereby building relationships and reducing misunderstandings (P16).

Various church ministries hold joint workshops, outreach evangelism, spiritual retreats, and so

on. These joint ministry activities are viable platforms where members strengthen their relationships and endeavor to resolve some conflicts (P14).

The field data is cognizant of the fact that some conflicts in the church arise due to generational gaps, ministry silos and differing perspectives on many issues in the church (leadership, and worship styles, programs, etc.). However, the high response rate in favour of inter-generational and cross-ministry implies that fostering collaboration between different age groups and ministries within the church is an important tool for transforming intra-ecclesial conflicts within the SDA church in SEKEF. This helps to bridge generational gaps and reduces misunderstandings among them, while fostering understanding and unity. Joint Church mission projects promote unity, strengthen community engagement, inspire future generations of mission workers, and create sustainability in church mission work. All these aspects, in effect, transform any existing conflicts into a formidable relational energy of the church. Inter-generational and cross-ministry collaboration promotes relationship building through service, where the SDA church members of different ages and ministries serve the church together, mentoring each other, especially the young ones in the life of the church.

Finally, the study looked at the component of community projects and social engagement as a conflict transformation mechanism. On this, questionnaire data from the respondents indicated an overwhelming majority of 72 (74.2%) in support, 4 (4.1%) were undecided, and 21 (21.6%) were not in agreement with the postulate. A respondent in the interviews added:

In SEKEF, we have had several joint community projects geared toward serving not just the SDA members, rather all kinds of members in the region. We have had work camps, outreach evangelism, visits to

orphanages and homes of the aged, visits to hospitals to pray and give hope to the sick, raised funds to pay school fees for those unable, etc. Planning these activities involves all members of the church regardless of their position in the church, and we have always done it without serious issues. In the case that we had disputes, all felt their responsibility to resolve them before they escalate (P15).

The verbatim data pointed out that jointly, the church members work together in community programs like feeding, home visits, outreach evangelism, and so forth. Church members, including those in leadership, work toward developing a sense of shared mission that transcends personal differences. It fosters unity, heals broken relationships, and promotes a shared purpose; in joint community service and the realisation of community projects, the focus is shifted from internal divisions to collective action. Community service and the realisation of community projects rebuild trust and foster collaboration, which creates opportunities for constructive relationships. Working side by side in community service projects encourages informal conversations and understanding among the members, especially among those in conflicting relationships. In its profound sense, joint community service projects promote healing and reconciliation through shared experiences, thereby deepening relationships.

The field findings and discussions are in agreement with Paffenholz (2009), who affirms the importance of a collegial manner of realising church affairs, denouncing any one-sided, top-down approach that does not bring all actors, including those affected by the conflict, into negotiation. Thus, in community projects, members of the church, including those who are in conflict relationally, face one another in the context of commitment to the church's mission, which requires a collaborative spirit for its realisation and as a way of giving witness to Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the field data and discussions, the study found that the church has put into place various church-based mechanisms like structured dialogues, leadership development and structural reforms, inter-generational and cross-ministry collaboration, community projects and social engagement. However, it concluded that mediation and negotiation, and counselling of victims of intra-ecclesial conflicts are not seriously taken by the church as an important internal conflict transformation mechanism for the unity of the church in SEKEF. The study recommended that the SDA church in SEKEF consider mediation and negotiation, and counselling of victims of intra-ecclesial conflicts as important intra-ecclesial conflict transformation mechanisms. This is informed by the fact that the two involve the use of diagnostic processes and interpersonal forms of conflict transformation relevant for the church.

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