

Original Research Article

Hindrances to Achievement of Intra-Ecclesial Conflict Transformation for the Unity of the Church: A Case of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in South East Kenya Field

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Abstract: The Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA), South East Kenya Field (SEKEF) has made incredible attempts to transform its internal conflicts. However, it is still facing multifaceted hindrances that impede the achievement of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation for sustainable unity and peace. The study used a qualitative case approach, which permitted in-depth search for internal church dynamics, centering on understanding informants' perspectives, experiences, and specific settings of intra-ecclesial conflicts. The target population was 280 with a sample size of 162 informants guided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) tabulation research arrangement. Purposive, simple random sampling, and censor techniques were used to determine participants in the study. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis tools were employed to collect field data. Thematic, content and narrative analyses techniques enucleated data analysis. The study found out that there are several factors that impede sustainable conflict transformation for the unity of the SDA church in SEKEF. It concluded that such factors range from lack of effective leadership, silence on the part of the church leadership, spiritualizing conflicts instead of addressing misconceptions, resistance to change, lack of professional mediation structures, poor communication, and dismissal of church-based ways in favour of litigation. It recommended the SDA church in SEKEF to invest more in handling conflicts in the church and avoid court litigation processes.

Keywords: Hindrances, Intra-ecclesial Conflict, Conflict Transformation, Church Unity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts in the wider community are inevitable whereby people in different social settings and groups often find themselves in them. Internal conflicts among church members are not something new in the history of Christianity. For instance, in the Acts of the Apostles, (Acts 6: 10), the early church had experienced internal conflicts where the Jews who spoke Hellenistic (Greek) complained of unfair distribution of food as their widows were being discriminated by the Jews who spoke Aramaic. Studies by Folarin and Adelakum (2016), and Page (2008) inform that church being part of the human community is not immune to such reality. 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 while shaping the future of the church.

From a global perspective, a study by Hicks (2010) in the US indicate that the Southern Baptist Church in Central Florida was destroyed by unreconciling factions. One radical group of the congregants did everything within its power to unveil and paint the bad picture of the church, especially its leadership; it refused to co-operate with the leadership structures of the church and instead resorted to physical violence. This created enmity, hatred and disunity within the church.

There are also cases where the church resorts to secular means to resolve its internal conflicts. For instance, a study by Craig (2003) reveals that in Kosovo and Macedonia, ethnic cleansing led to the destruction of many Orthodox Churches and Monasteries. The Church leadership, dismissed using available church

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mechanisms and preferred to resolve the conflict with the intervention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). But resorting to secular, political and military organizations gives church conflicts political underpinnings which undermines church-based approaches and solutions.

A study by Pali (2018) speaks of the challenge of silence of the African church on its internal conflicts. It urges the Dutch church to reexamine herself and openly speak out what ails her from within; the same study encouraged the church to come up with church-based conflict transformative frameworks that enrich its membership. Studies by Tutu (1999) and Crocombe (2007) address the challenge of discrimination in the South African church; they applaud the church leadership, specifically the Anglican Methodist and Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) churches that boldly condemned any form of discrimination and called for unity among their followers.

While studies by Longman (2010) and Stier & Landres (2006) speak of the politicized and discriminatory nature of Christian organizations in Rwanda that led to 1994 genocide. The political context of the country is responsible for conflicts within the church that caused hatred in the membership. But the church leadership's susceptibility to external political influence and its inability to resist shows the church's failure to be an agent of unity; it manifests the church's unpreparedness to transform external political conflicts into a formidable force for the unity of society, including its own membership.

In Kenya, a study by Wanjigi (2006) explains that church internal conflicts are motivated by leadership wrangles leading the church to use splits and formation of new local churches as a solution. But this is more of avoidance to collectively re-look on the deeper problems ailing the church. It is an approach that manifests the unpreparedness of both church leadership and hinders congregants to deal their internal conflicts in positive ways.

In the context of the SDA church in South East Kenya Field (SEKEF), studies by Ondieki (2019), Otieno (2019), and Obebo (2022) on internal conflicts point to the fact that the top leadership instead of taking the power to positively resolve its conflicts ailing the membership, it chooses to remain silent, and in most cases prefers court litigation processes to resolve church conflicts. Sometimes the leadership of the church, including SEKEF erroneously resorts to church splits, creating new churches and church territories as a solution to internal conflicts. The underlined gaps informed this study on specific internal church obstacles that prevent effective conflict transformation for the unity of the SDA church in SEKEF.

2. Statement of the Problem

The Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church in South East Kenya Field (SEKEF) struggles with multifaceted internal conflicts that sometimes remain unresolved or poorly managed. This undermines its ability and mission to witness the gospel. Despite the church efforts to transform the existing internal conflicts for sustainable unity and peace of its member, there are multifaceted internal hindrances to this endeavor; hindrances that weaken its ability to engage in constructive conflict transformation. This made the study to investigate specific SDA church-based obstacles that prevent effective conflict transformation for the unity of its members in SEKEF.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The complex nature of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation mechanisms is not without its church-based hindrances. Such hindrances include theological, refusal to co-operate, failure to enact the culture of conflict transformation, internal church politics, preference of Court Litigation Processes to religious solutions, and so forth. For instance, differences in theological views among church leaders and theologians can hinder attempts to bring unity among Christians. A study by Lewis (2007) pointed out that the Anglican Bishop Colenso because of his ecclesiological argument for universalism of the church, and his radical theological declaration that the Pentateuch was unhistorical, led to the breakup of the Anglican Church from the Church of England. The bishop's ecclesiological and theological position brought a critical disagreement in the church that affected the unity of the Anglican/church members, which has not been resolved to date.

Most Christians tend to sustain an equivocal theology (whether implicitly or explicitly) that conflicts are wrong or sinful, instead of understanding them as an important element in the church that engages members for a continuous search for change and growth. For instance, Page (2008), holds that erroneous theological positions are influenced by the fear of the possible accompanying vices like anger, enmity, violence, insults, vengeance, and so on. The that is also sustained by Oppenshaw (2017) who asserts that because of the negative results, of conflicts are regarded as bad, unacceptable and, therefore, sinful, coming from the devil and from those with spiritual deficiency. Such a view hinders attempts to confront intra-ecclesial conflicts leading to their dismissal. But the dismissal of any positive aspects of intra-ecclesial conflicts contributes to negative culture of avoidance of conflicts that impede efforts to analyze them for a transformative process that is geared towards the unity of the church. Further, it is a manifestation of a conservative approach to conflicts and a lack of a liberal theology of intra-ecclesial conflicts.

There is also the refusal to co-operate in finding ways to positively make use the existing conflicts in the church. For instance, DRCA OFS, synod (2015; 2017) informs that some leaders and members of the church congregations refuse to co-operate and prefer to use violence to disrupt worship services, use obscene language, protest and physical threats. While some ministers tend to function and think of planting churches all over as a solution to internal conflicts. Refusal to cooperate leads to negation of all possible platforms for listening to each other; it impedes all intent of those who want to work through the conflict for the good of the church.

Appleby (2006) posits that failure to understand and enact the culture of conflict transformation is one of the great obstacles to conflict transformation within the church. This is also echoed by Macaulay (2013) who sustains that there is lack of commitment by some church leaders and ministers who dedicate most of their energies and priorities to sacramental and pastoral life of the church leaving little time for the construction of the unity and peace building of the congregants. The failure is grounded on the uncertainty of some church members and leaders to respond to situations of intra-ecclesial conflicts appropriately, and also the fear to upset lay members. However, Kreider (2005) advises that for conflict transformation to be effective, the church needs to transform herself in order to create a “culture of unity”. The position that is also reiterated by Boyd-MacMillan, et al (2016) who contend that to truly “transform” conflict, those involved must rethink they regard themselves and others in the conflict and their abilities to positively work through the conflict.

Studies by Atieno (2019), Wangui (2020) posit that internal politics hinder so many attempts to unite the church leading to protracted wrangles and divisions in numerous churches. Ward (2012) claims that influential members sell their Christian identity to attain their political goals, they manipulate church members to ascend to power with the sole purpose of having access to church resources, and control them. This brings division among the church members and in the long run split the Christian community. Whereas Atieno (2019) informs that internal church conflicts are motivated by the interest to have leadership and money power and control, without any spiritual implications.

While studies by Ondieki (2019), Otieno (2019), and Obebo (2022) speak of the church’s tendency to prefer court litigation processes to any church-based mechanism in resolving its internal conflicts. Church members trust more court litigation than managing their conflicts within the purview of the church. Gathuki (2015) informs that instead of amicably and jointly transforming the existing conflicts that ail the various SDA churches, court litigation is erroneously considered and taken to be the solution, which is an obstacle to church endeavors.

4. METHODOLOGY

As advised by Cozby and Bates (2012), Kumar (2014), and Creswell (2021), the study used a qualitative case approach, which permitted in-depth search for internal church operational dynamics, centering on understanding informants’ perspectives, experiences, and specific settings of hindrances to intra-ecclesial conflict transformation from two prone SDA church Stations (Nyamonyo and Gotichaki). Further, this approach aided in unconcealing overlooked aspects of conflicts in the church, aspects that are crucial for sustainable peace in the Christian community. The target population was 280 with a sample size of 162 informants consisting of included 15 church union leaders, pastors, 10 deacons, 25 church elders and 104 church members. The determination of the sample size was guided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) tabulation research arrangement. Purposive, simple random sampling, and censor techniques were used to determine participants in the study. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis tools were employed to collect field data. Thematic, content and narrative analyses techniques guided data analysis.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study investigated the hindrances impeding the achievement of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation in the SDA church in SEKEF. A five-point Likert scale was used to determine the opinion of the respondents where A – Agree, SA - Strongly Agree, N - Neutral, D – Disagree and SD – Strongly Disagree. The responses were supported by those from the interviews and focused group discussions.

Table 1.1: Hindrances to the achievement of Intra-Conflict Transformation in SDA church, SEKEF

Item	A	SA	N	D	SD	Total
Misconceptions around intra-ecclesial conflicts	R-66 %-68.0	12 12.7	4 4.1	12 12.4	8 8.2	97 100%
Silence on the part of the church leadership to openly acknowledge and speak of its internal conflicts	R-68 %-70.1	13 13.4	3 3.1	11 11.3	2 2.1	97 100%
Spiritualizing conflicts instead of addressing them	R-73 %-75.3	7 7.2	3 3.1	12 12.4	2 2.1	97 100%
Lack of effective leadership	R-80 %-82.5	5 5.2	2 2.1	8 8.2	2 2.1	97 100%
Resistance to change	R-66	10	5	13	3	97

Item	A	SA	N	D	SD	Total
	%-68.0	10.3	5.2	13.4	3.1	100%
Dismissal of church-based mechanisms in favour of litigation processes	R-24 %-24.7	12 12.4	2 2.1	56 57.7	3 3.1	97 100%
Lack of Professional Mediation Structures in the church	R-63 %-64.9	5 5.2	3 3.1	19 19.6	7 7.2	97 100%
Poor communication	R-55 %-56.7	4 4.1	2 2.1	34 35.1	2 2.1	97 100%
Inability to enact the culture of conflict transformation	R-10 %-10.3	7 7.2	2 2.1	70 72.3	8 8.2	97 100%

Key: R – Respondents, %-Percentage

Table 1.1 illustrated the questionnaire responses on hindrances to achievement of intra-conflict transformation for the unity of the SDA church in SEKEF. On the item of misconceptions around internal church conflicts, the questionnaire findings showed 78 (80.4%) of the respondents had the view that there are misconceptions around intra-ecclesial conflicts which hinder the process of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation, 4 (4.1%) were undecided, while a minority of 20 (20.6%) were of the contrary opinion. In support of the view of the majority, a participant in the interviews informed:

Conflicts are bad and sinful for the church; they are the work of the devil aiming to destroy the unity of the church as they make members unforgiving. They hinder effective solutions as members fear to have open dialogues on church matters. This makes the church not to be united. We should never allow conflicts in the church (P2).

The field data acknowledges that there are misconceptions around intra-ecclesial conflicts in the SDA church in SEKEF. Such misconceptions that conflicts are inherently bad, sinful, the work of the devil, and therefore should be allowed to happen in the church. However, such misconceptions significantly hinder their transformation, creating barriers to open dialogues, misunderstandings, and impediment to reconciliation.

Most church members believe that disagreements among them signify lack of faith, or lack of spiritual maturity. But when the church membership and leaders believe that conflicts are entirely negative, they miss the mark; they may ignore or suppress issues that lead to negative conflicts rather than addressing them constructively. Ignoring or avoiding conflicts often fester problems in the church, which lead to deeper resentment and division in the church membership. Further, avoidance of conflicts makes the church not to regard them as an opportunity for growth and deeper understanding even when they are properly handled.

On the second postulate, respondents were asked of the silence on the part of church leadership to openly acknowledge and speak of its internal conflicts. The questionnaire field findings informed an overwhelming majority of 81 (83.5%) of the respondents

affirmed the thesis, 3 (3.1%) were neutral, while a minority of 13 (13.4%) held the contrary view. This was reiterated by those in the interviews who added:

Truth must be said, most often there are no circulars to inform church members on its internal conflicts. We get to know about church conflicts in SEKEF through social media platforms, unverified gossips, and through the press. The church seems to have chosen silence in dealing with its conflicts that sometimes are not properly handled leading to wider divisions in the church membership (P9).

The overwhelming number of the respondents showed silence to be a critical issue that impedes the realization of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation for the unity of the church in SEKEF. The respondents perceive church leadership as somewhat reluctant to openly address and discuss internal conflicts. But then this leads to avoiding and allowing conflict issues to escalate, fosters resentment, and weakens the church's unity. Local church members and leaders opt to avoid addressing conflicts due to fear of divisions in the church, maintaining a false sense of a peaceful membership and believing that speaking about conflicts in the church is being nonspiritual. However, the SDA church in SEKEF should know silence on church internal conflicts or when conflicts are not addressed openly, is a breeding platform where members often resort to gossip and mistrust, leading to deeper divisions within the church. And those behind church conflicts become unaccountable and irresponsible in the owning them.

The field findings are in tandem with McSwain (2013) who informs that failure to recognize 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. Speaking out is essential to comprehending the kinds of conflicts ailing the church, the underlying causes, and church reactions to them.

Respondents were asked if spiritualizing conflicts instead of addressing them is a critical obstacle to intra-ecclesial conflict transformation the SDA church in SEKEF. The questionnaire data revealed an overwhelming majority of 80 (82.5%) of the respondents in support of the postulate, 3 (3.1%) were undecided;

while a minority of 14 (14.4%) were of the contrary opinion. The opinion of the majority in support of the thesis was also echoed by those a respondent in the interviews who reported:

Whenever we have conflicts in the church, we just pray about them and leave everything to God who knows all. Internal church conflicts are the work of the devil that is fighting God in the church and testing the faith of the church members. To involve myself in conflicts is to commit sin, which I don't want (P4). This is why we have to pray and let God take control (P8).

The field data is alive to the fact that spiritualizing internal church conflicts rather than addressing them hinders conflict transformation as it leads to avoiding real issues; it grows harmful behaviors, while discouraging accountability and ownership of the problem that is causing internal conflicts in the church. The field data also indicated that there are church members who hold the view that prayer alone resolves and transforms internal church conflicts. Even though this cannot entirely be dismissed, prayer must be accompanied by practical steps such as honest communication, mediation, and reconciliation efforts. As informed by James 2:17 (ESV), faith without action can lead to unresolved tensions that escalate to conflicts. The church cannot just pray; it has to work beyond prayer to other measurable measures in transforming internal church conflicts. When conflicts are tagged as purely “spiritual battles,” real causes of conflicts (leadership misconduct, financial mismanagement, or personal disputes) are ignored, and therefore, not directly addressed.

On lack of effective leadership, 85 (87%) of participants supported the postulate, 2 (2.1%) were undecided, and a minority of 10 (10.3%) held the view that the SDA church in SEKEF has effective leadership. Participants in the interviews added:

We have leaders who are poor in communication, lack mediation and negotiation skills but they lead in settling disputes among church members; some fail to communicate church conflicts openly and instead opt to form conflicting groups. But this creates a platform of secrecy, gossip and mistrust (P1).

Some church leaders are authoritarian and impose their views on the church members. Such leaders think they know everything in the church, and therefore not open to any other form of resolving internal church disputes. But then, this hinders any viable way that could aid in transforming internal church disputes to something that could benefit the entire church membership (P15)

The field data point the fact that there is lack of effective leadership to handle church conflicts, which

impedes their transformation for the unity of the church. Church leadership related issues often contribute to church disputes. Effective leadership is critical for internal church conflict transformation in the SDA church in SEKEF. When leaders lack necessary skills, wisdom or willingness to address internal church conflicts, such conflicts escalate, leading to division and disunity in the church. The verbatim data point out lack of mediation skills in handling disputes in the church leading to unresolved or unfairly handled issues, causing further tensions among church members. Field data further informs of authoritarian leadership in the SDA church which imposes decisions without listening the views of those in conflicts. Autocratic leaders fail to consult with the wider church membership, conflicts escalate.

Poor leadership creates an environment where misunderstandings go unaddressed, accountability is compromised, and reconciliation efforts are bound to fail. It ignores conflicts, hoping that they will resolve themselves, which leads to further unresolved issues festering and causing deeper divisions within the church members.

The field findings are tandem with Folarin and Adelakun (2016) who maintain that effective leaders see conflicts as normal, natural, and inevitable, and therefore handle them in line with the principles and vision of the church. According Naganag (2019), visionary church leaders play a crucial role in mediating disputes between church members. They openly acknowledge the reality and existence of internal conflicts and discourage the attitude of evasion or avoidance that degenerate violent conflicts without taking into account their causes and effects to the membership of the church.

On resistance to change as a hindrance, the questionnaire field data indicated a majority of 76 (78.4%) respondents in support of the view that there is resistance to change, 5 (5.2%) were not sure, and a minority of 16 (16.5%) respondents was of the contrary view. This was also echoed in the interviews, where participants informed:

Young members of the church of the progressive stances are more agile and push for changes in leadership, worship styles, and new ways of community engagement. But some church members and leaders of conservative stances are opposed to any change in the church, especially if that is touching the tradition of the church, even if that change is good in terms of being progressive (P9).

Some leaders in church do not want to be removed; they want to stay in power even if their style of leadership does not speak to the congregation. In the case that they are removed, they incite the congregation not accept the new incoming leaders. This

resistance is causing a lot of harm to the reputation of the SDA church in SEKEF (P13).

The field data is emphatic on the fact that resistance to change as one of the biggest obstacles to the transformation of intra-ecclesial conflicts in SEKEF. Many church members and leaders prefer to maintain traditions, structures and ways of handling issues, even when those traditions and structures are the causes of ongoing disputes. For instance, some church leaders and members hold onto traditions or outdated conflict resolution approaches that no longer properly serve the congregation. To such church members, instead of addressing church disputes with fresh, biblical ways, they prefer and rely on ineffective past practices.

Some resist change because they fear uncertainty or discomfort brought by internal church conflict. This fear prevents church members from implementing new conflict transformation mechanisms that call for transparency, accountability, and leadership structuring. The verbatim field data speaks of resistance to change due power struggles as some leaders want to stay in authority, fearing that new conflict transformation processes might challenge their position and remove them from the authority of the church.

The findings are supported by Rendle (2000) who sustains that churches resist change because they fear things may get out of control, and make the church stagnant. Also supported by Brubaker (2009) who holds that changes to the church's leadership structure degenerate into further conflict since the conflict is grounded on power-struggle and those who are settled in the leadership positions are not willing to relinquish them. These prevent meaningful and transformative ways thereby leading more to divisions, stagnation, and frustration among church members.

The study further looked at dismissal of church-based ways in favour of litigation processes. The questionnaire field data showed that 36 (37.1%) were in support dismissal of church-based mechanisms in favor of court litigation processes as an impediment to the realization of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation process, 2 (2.1%) were undecided, while a majority of 59 (60.8%) held the view that the SDA church in SEKEF does not dismiss church-based mechanisms in favor or court litigation processes.

The church manual stipulates clear ways of resolving church conflicts. The unfortunate thing is that sometimes instead of strict adherence to the church policies, some members of the church, especially those fighting for top leadership positions resort to sought out their differences and lust for power through court litigation mechanisms. But, then, this undermines biblical principles, mediation, reconciliation, and other church mechanisms

that are proper to the church and its tradition (P12).

There are several reasons why litigation in resolving church conflicts can be detrimental to the church-based conflict transformation mechanism, and its overall mission. For instance, it harbors hatred, resentment, vengeance, destroys the reputation of the church, and above the church loses its moral voice to speak against conflicts in the larger society (P11).

The questionnaire findings reflect a moderate level of disagreement which suggests that while there could be some dismissal of church-based mechanisms, it is not majorly perceived as a major issue in the SDA church in SEKEF. However, the data underlines the importance of handling of internal church conflicts within the church framework which considers acceptance of conflicts as opportunities for personal and spiritual growth, encouraging forgiveness, empathy, and restoration of relationships. It is a biblical imperative to believers to settle disputes within the church rather than is secular courts (1 Corinthians 6:1-7, ESV).

Taking conflicts to be resolved in court ignores Christian biblical teachings on reconciliation, forgiveness, and mediation. It damages the unity of the church unity and reputation leading to the loss of trust and decline in membership as some church members may opt out of the church. Further, a resolve to court litigation implies that the church has lost control over the resolution processes; it has lost the ability to handle matters proper to it and instead surrender the power to secular institutions that probably know less about the church.

When conflicts are settled internally within the church, it helps to sustain human relationships through reconciliation, respect for one another, love, forgiveness, humility, and so on. It is easier to repair relationships, heal wounds, and preserve the unity of the church. But legal action often tends to deepen divisions and creates adversarial relationships that damage church unity.

On the postulate of lack of professional mediation structures in the church as an obstacle to the realization of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation processes, the questionnaire field findings demonstrated 68 (70.1%) in support, 3 (3.1%) undecided, and 26 (26.8%) not in supported of the thesis. Participants in the interviews added:

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 injured, churches closed. This shows no one is willing to go for peaceful and relational ways of handling conflicts in the church. Furthermore, there are no professional mediation structures, which is

an indication that the church is not prepared (P2).

Whenever conflicts arise among the church members, the affected report to the chief, police, which leads to unresolved disputes, biased decision-making, escalated tensions. This happens at the lower levels. Members do this because there are no ecclesial institutions professionally prepared for this purpose. The church is short of professional mediators to handle disputes in its membership (P7).

The field data underlines lack of professional mediation in the SDA church in SEKEF as a great obstacle to intra-ecclesial conflict transformation for the unity of the church. Without formal mediation processes, internal church conflicts are likely to be handled inconsistently, depending on who is involved or how influential is the person handling them. Improper handling of issues escalates into major church divisions, sometimes leading to members leaving the church or even taking legal action. This hardly happens in a situation professional mediation where trained mediation teams have clear policies and structured processes.

The study further evaluated the aspect of communication in the SDA church in SEKEF as an obstacle that impedes the realization of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation for the unity of the church members. The questionnaire findings indicated 59 (60.8%) of the respondents endorsing the postulate that there is poor communication of church issues, 2 (2.1%) of the respondents were neutral, while 36 (37.1%) held a contrary view. On this, respondents from the interviews were not shy to report:

Poor communication from church leaders is often a source of intra-ecclesial conflicts. When leaders fail to clearly articulate decisions, explain church policies, or listen to the concerns of their congregants, the outcomes are misreporting and misinterpretations that lead to misunderstandings and gossip in the church. These elements fester into larger disputes, especially if church members in any way feel unheard or marginalized (P9).

Once in the church it happened that financial reports were presented to the finance committee and the figures were not tallying with those in the actual financial books. It was not that the finances were lost, but whoever reported had not fully gone through the financial records. This misreporting caused negative reactions from the financial committee members; some reported the matter to outside church members who accused the financial team of embezzling church funds. The matter brought a lot of tensions in the church which led to conflicts in

the finance committee to the point that some members in the finance team pulled out (P11).

When church communication is unclear, inconsistent, or avoided altogether, conflicts escalate as church members lack clear information about issues affecting them; they may rely on speculation, rumour, or gossip, which worsen any existing conflicts. From the verbatim data, unclear communication fosters confusion and unnecessary tensions in the church community. Poor communication leads to misunderstandings, and church concerns misinterpreted, distrust, and also divisions that hinder the church's unity and effectiveness in witnessing the message of the gospel; it escalates small issues into bigger conflicts since they are not clearly addressed earlier.

Finally, the study examined the aspect of the SDA church's inability to enact the culture of conflict transformation mechanisms as an obstacle to the realization of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation in SEKEF. The responses from the questionnaire showed a minority of 17 (17.5%) respondents in support that the church is unable, 2 (2.1%), whereas an overwhelming majority of 78 (80.4%) did not agree that the church is unable to enact the culture of conflict transformation in SEKEF. The view of the majority was also echoed in the interviews where a participant informed:

The church has several mechanisms for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation which include spiritual approaches, community based, preaching, biblical reflections, training, and so on. The only problem is that when it comes to professional methods like mediation, negotiations, and counseling, the church does not have enough resources and structures to manage them. It is, therefore, not true to assert that the church is unable to enact the culture of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation (P13).

The field data affirms that the SDA church in SEKEF has the ability to enact the culture of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation as the church has sufficient mechanisms to do so. The church is daily involved in reconciliation activities, building relationships, advocacy mission, and even healing of those affected by conflicts. These activities help create a culture where conflicts are not just managed, but more importantly transformed into opportunities for growth in the life of the community. However, the field data is also cognizant of the fact that the SDA church in SEKEF does not have all the resources, especially programs that require professional expertise like mediation, negotiation and counseling. The field findings are supported by Appleby (2006) who posits that failure to understand and enact the culture of conflict transformation is one of the obstacles facing leaders, church members and groups in the treatment of conflicts for transformation.

6. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that there are various obstacles impeding the achievement of intra-ecclesial conflict transformation in SDA church in SEKEF. In a manner of gravity and priority the obstacles range from lack of effective leadership, silence on the part the of the church leadership, spiritualizing conflicts instead of addressing misconceptions around internal church conflicts, resistance to change, lack of professional mediation structures in the church, and finally, poor communication, dismissal of church-based ways in favour of litigation processes.

7. RECOMMENDATION

The study recommended the SDA church in SEKEF to involve itself more by investing in effective leadership, speak out conflicts in the church, not to spiritualize conflicts and instead address them, clarify areas that lead to misconceptions around internal church conflicts, be open and embrace change in the church, invest in professional mediation structures, and improve communication.

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