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Ecclesial Fragmentation and Corporate Unity: An Investigation into the Sources of Intra-Church Conflict within the South East Kenya Field of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Abstract

Intra-ecclesial conflict is one that exists within religious institutions and organizations and is ongoing and prevalent which is highly threatening to the unity of the community and unity and integrity of the institution. Conflict is a natural aspect of human social systems, but it has to be studied in the context of faith communities because it can have a significant impact on the theological belief system and unity within the church. This study investigates the nature, causes and consequences of intra-ecclesial conflicts in order to preserve the unity of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in the South East Kenya Field (SEKEF). This research is informed by a conflict transformation framework, as articulated by Väyrynen (1991) and Lederach (1995), and uses a phenomenological design to immerse oneself in the experiences of church members' conflict and to discover individual and collective processes for constructive conflict transformation. The population consisted of 280 people, such as church leaders, union leaders, church elders, deaconesses and members of the church. The sampling technique was the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table, and the number of samples was 162, the data were obtained through documentation analysis and semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The findings show that there is a high prevalence of intra-ecclesial conflicts in SEKEF with corruption, religious intolerance and factional politics as cited by 92.8% of the respondents as the main causes of such conflicts. Such conflicts emerge in leadership and lay sectors, and can result in a loss of trust, unity and mission effectiveness. The study suggests that to achieve sustainable unity in the SEKEF, a proactive and systemic process of conflict transformation is needed and that the development of leadership in the reconciliatory way and the institutionalisation of participatory governance is a prerequisite. It suggests specific interventions aimed at capacity-building church leaders in the areas of conflict mediation and restorative practices, and larger structural changes to tackle underlying issues of conflict.

Key Words: Intra-ecclesial, Conflict Transformation, Church Unity, Seventh Day Adventist, Organizational Cohesion, Religious Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a universal phenomenon of human relationship at the international, regional and national levels and is a given in interpersonal and intergroup relationships. From the myriads of social collectives, people are always bound to experience conflict, both from inside and out. Folarin and Adelakun (2016) and Ogaro, et al (2025) rightly claim that ecclesial community, which is a part of the wider human community, is no exception to this universal reality. Notably, there are extant studies which state that conflict is an inherent feature of church as a social institution, but at the same time, it serves as a critical heuristic matrix to study the authentic disposition of believers and to predict the direction of the church (Page, 2008; Folarin & Adelakun, 2016; Ogaro, et al 2025). The duality of conflict, as a challenge and as an evaluative tool highlights the need for a theological and sociological dialogue with the forms of conflict. The intra-ecclesial conflicts should not be the end of ecclesial unity, nor should they lead to schism, acrimony, and loss of communal cohesion, but rather take the high-priestly stance of Jesus Christ who prayed for the unity of His Church (John 17:20-23, ESV). This theological imperative has been given resonant expression in the Pauline writings, in the epistle to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 12:12-13, ESV), in which the Apostle uses the metaphor of the body to describe the interdependent and symbiotic relationship among various charismatic and functional ministries, each serving the greater good of corporate unity. Paul's dialectical thinking assumes that despite the diversity of gifts and functions there is an undivided solidarity that the ecclesial body is called to. Conflicts have paradoxical constructive potentials, whether as part of a conflict or as a reaction to it, regardless of whether it is violent or pacific, expressed or unexpressed. However, the main problematic, which is the focus of the present investigation, lies in the mechanisms and modalities for the constructive transformation of internal ecclesiastical dissonance, which this study attempts to fill from the critical-exegetical and socio-empirical perspective (Ogaro, et al 2025).

A marked lack of unity within Christian communities is hardly a new phenomenon in church history; such divisions can be found at the very beginning of the apostolic era and have continued to plague the church through the ages. A typical example is provided by the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:1-6, ESV), in which the fledgling church in Jerusalem was beset with a serious dispute over the fair distribution of daily necessities, Hellenistic Jews complaining

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that Hebraic Jews were discriminating against them in the care of their widows. Significantly, this conflict was not rejected, condemned or quelled by the apostolic leadership but was accepted as legitimate and responded pastorally with wisdom, the establishment of a diaconal apparatus, seven men filled with the Holy Spirit to manage the distribution of alms and food. This constructive response did not only redress the grievance and bring dignity to the Hellenistic side, but it also kept the community united, resulting in the numerical and geographical growth of the primitive church. The example of the past should remind us that conflict, when managed with theological clarity and administrative wisdom, can be an instrument of transformation, which is relevant for the life of the Church today.

This is the thesis that underpins this study, namely that existing intra-ecclesial conflicts, if uncharged with forces of renewal and reconceptualization, make the church an inauthentic force for Christ's unity and social transformation, a church that is reflected in varied institutional responses. Often, the church hierarchy engages in strategic silence and passive acquiescence, aiming at suppressing dissension, but rather than developing participatory mechanisms to resolve conflict and empower congregants to do so without sacrificing ecclesial unity. A disturbing contradiction is that the church, which passionately seeks to engage in a ministry of reconciliation and peace-building in public, fails to attend to the intrapersonal aspects of conflict resolution, thereby leaving unaddressed internal divisions that erode its moral legitimacy and effectiveness. This intra-mural disregard is especially significant in that members of the church are at the same time citizens of the larger socio-political framework, and thus an unresolved conflict within the church has repercussions outside, mutes the church's prophetic voice in the larger socio-political context. In the particular South-East Kenya Field (SEKEF) of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, the experience of intra-ecclesial conflict is similar to the patterns outlined above, and has been disruptive to the unity and integrity of the church. The observation here is echoed by Gathuki (2015), who points out that although the SDA church is experiencing an extraordinary numerical growth rate and has built up a massive infrastructure in Kenya, it is constantly beset with internal antagonisms that are undermining both the spiritual life and organizational unity of the church. One such irrefutable example was the ongoing crisis at the Maxwell Church (Nairobi Central Church) that finally resulted in the indefinite closing down of the church premises in August 2019, which was as a result of the State and not the Church, and

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was demonstrated by the presence of Police officers to watch over the congregation while they were worshiping. The denominational leadership, instead of taking the opportunity to model transformative conflict engagement, chose to remain silent, and leave the adjudication of ecclesial conflicts to the secular judiciary (The Star Newspaper, 2019; Citizen Weekly, 2019; Ondieki, 2019; Otieno, 2019; Kenya Law, 2021; Obebo, 2022). Moreover, Gathuki (2015) argues that this 'unhealthy' strategy has ushered in the church's 'bleeding' and hindered the church's growth in numbers. More alarming, he says, is that the leadership often reverts to a quick-fix solution to some underlying troubles: splitting off from existing congregations to establish new ecclesiastical territories, thereby inflicting further attrition as members go off to find spiritual enlightenment elsewhere or leave the church altogether. When the analytical lens is focused on SEKEF, specifically on the former Gosere station, similar patterns of intra-ecclesial dissonance can be felt with administrative issues being at the heart of the conflict, creating division between two rival stations: Nyamonyo and Gotichaki (Otieno, 2019; Abuga, 2020; Obebo, 2022; Mutiso, 2022, Ogaro, et al. 2025). This investigation is driven by the epistemic gap - the tendency in church leadership to think of conflict as a bad thing, and to ignore its potential for transformation that comes from engaging it in a positive way. I believe that this minimalist approach to conflict contributes to cycles of conflict and also misses the opportunity to conflict for learning within institutions, maturing of soul, and social witnessing. Hence, the lack of leadership in engaging these entrenched antagonisms in a positive way and turning them into a catalyst for church renewal is a significant gap that this study sought to fill, offering a theologically-rich and culturally nuanced model of conflict transformation in the SDA Church in SEKEF.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is based on the theory of conflict transformation (CTT) which is described by Curle (1971), Väyrynen (1991), and Lederach (1995, 1997, 2014). CTT assumes that conflict is a dynamic and transformative force and posits rebalancing relationships, conscientisation, negotiations and change of structure at the individual, organizational and systemic level as potential trajectories for conflict. CTT differs from conflict management or resolution, because it emphasizes process over outcome: engaging stakeholders in a way that is inclusive, recognizing each stakeholder's legitimate claims, and building peace in the longer term through relational and structural transformation. It assumes that sustainable change is

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achieved by targeting underlying drivers, engaging in dialogue and nurturing adaptive, justice-based responses. CTT provides a strong tool for understanding the source of the conflict, involving all actors and developing interventions that are cooperative and contextually appropriate in the SEKEF context, where traditional methods have failed. The theory highlights the importance of moving from conflictual to non-violent relationships, the need to formalize dialogue at various levels within the church and to institutionalize participatory processes. Finally, CTT frames conflict as an opportunity for productive, ecclesial change, provided that conscious, inclusive and systemic processes are undertaken to address the pragmatic relational and structural factors that give rise to conflict.

METHODOLOGY

The design of this study was phenomenological, which involved individual and collective transformative measures in intra-ecclesial conflicts in South East Kenya Field (SEKEF). The census sampling, purposive sampling and simple random sampling methods were used to select a sample of 162 from the target population of 280 (15 union leaders, 8 pastors, 33 deaconesses, 44 elders, 180 members) from Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table. Data were gathered using questionnaires, interviews and document analysis.

RESULTS

Table 3.1: Nature of Intra-ecclesial Conflicts in SEKEF

Item	A	SA	N	D	SD	Total
Intra-ecclesial conflicts exist in the SDA church in SEKEF	*R-85*	*05*	*3*	*3*	*1*	**97**
	%-87.6	*5.2*	*3.1*	*3.1*	*1.0*	**100%**
Intra-ecclesial conflicts are majorly economic and misuse of church resources	*R-65*	*05*	*7*	*16*	*4*	**97**
	%-67.0	*5.2*	*7.2*	*16.5*	*4.1*	**100%**
Intra-ecclesial conflicts are caused by leadership and lust for power to control many aspects of the church	*R-79*	*6*	*3*	*6*	*3*	**97**
	%-81.4	*6.2*	*3.1*	*6.2*	*3.1*	**100%**
Differences in theological views	*R-11*	*15*	*8*	*38*	*18*	**97**
	%-11.3	*15.5*	*8.2*	*39.2*	*18.6*	**100%**

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Communication related (poor communication on church matters) conflicts	*R-53*	*5*	*10*	*13*	*16*	**97**
	%-54.6	*5.2*	*10.3*	*13.4*	*16.5*	**100%**
Silence of the church on conflicts	*R-63*	*2*	*3*	*27*	*2*	**97**
	%-64.9	*2.1*	*3.1*	*27.8*	*2.1*	**100%**
Divergent and intolerance to accommodate different viewpoints among church members	*R-73*	*5*	*3*	*11*	*5*	**97**
	%-75.3	*5.2*	*3.1*	*11.3*	*5.2*	**100%**
Divisive church politics	*R-68*	*4*	*8*	*12*	*5*	**97**
	%-70.1	*4.1*	*8.2*	*12.4*	*5.2*	**100%**
Corruption in the church	*R-76*	*4*	*8*	*8*	*1*	**97**
	%-78.4	*4.1*	*8.2*	*8.2*	*1.0*	**100%**
Confusion/unclear roles in the church	*R-18*	*2*	*1*	*56*	*20*	**97**
	%-18.6	*2.1*	*1.0*	*57.7*	*20.6*	**100%**

Key: *R - Respondents, % - Percentage*

SA *- Strongly Agree;* ***A*** *- Agree;* ***N*** *- Neutral;* ***SD*** *- Strongly Disagree;* ***D*** *- Disagree.*

DISCUSSIONS

The first item in the study was to establish the existence of intra-ecclesial conflicts that adversely affect the unity of the SDA church in SEKEF. This was done first to find out if there was a real study problem. The field findings in table 4.6 showed that indeed there are intra-ecclesial conflicts with an overwhelming majority of 90 (92.8%) respondents endorsing the postulate, 3 (3.1%) were undecided, and a minority of 4 (4.1%) were not in agreement that there are intra-ecclesial conflicts in the SDA church in SEKEF. The overwhelming view of the majority in support was also supported by a participant in the interviews who informed:

We cannot deny the fact that the SDA church in SEKEF is rocked by conflicts that have seen the centres of worship being closed; church leaders and pastors thrown out of the church and denied to lead any service, and church members not are speaking to each other. This ugly situation affects the credibility of the church in the region. This calls for the church leaders to find ways to bring the church back to its lost glory (P51).

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The field findings overwhelmingly admitted that there are intra-ecclesial conflicts that adversely destroy the unity of church in SEKEF. Like any other human community, and as it was in the early church (Acts 15: 36-40; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13), conflicts are part of the community, which cannot be denied. Conflicts happen when parties find themselves in a situation which stimulates mutually incompatible goals.

After establishing the existence of the problem to warrant the discussions of the field findings, the study embarked to assess the nature of the conflicts. The questionnaire findings indicated that 70 (72.2%) of the respondents supported the thesis that intra-ecclesial conflicts in SEKEF are majorly of economic and misuse of church resources, 7 (7.2%) were neutral, and 20 (20.6%) of the respondents were in disagreement. In support of the majority who opine that conflicts in the SDA church in SEKEF are of economic and misuse of church resources, participants in the interview informed:

Intra-ecclesial conflicts are as a result of economic interests and misuse of church funds, unequal distribution of resources, and lack of transparency in financial matters. These issues create tensions between church leaders and members. In some cases, these conflicts may be exacerbated by economic hardships facing some group of the church (P6). In some local churches, there is lack of financial transparency, where church leaders fail to give clear financial reports. This makes church members feel that their tithes and offerings are not being used properly, leading to dissatisfaction and disputes (P20). As church leaders, we have to admit that there is misuse of church funds through unapproved projects, allowances, and most of the time for personal projects. But then, these issues create resentment among church members to point of rejecting some leaders of the church (P19). In the church, there is unequal distribution of resources whereby we find certain groups or individuals benefit more from church resources while others feel neglected. Some ministries or departments receive more funding than others. All these things lead to internal conflicts in the membership and leadership of the church (P35).

The field findings indicated a higher response rate for economic interests and misuse of church funds, implying this to be an issue of a major concern that brings intra-ecclesial conflicts in the SDA church in SEKEF. Sometimes there is misallocation of church funds, where funds meant for evangelism mission of the church like charity and church development are diverted to non-essential, not budgeted or even personal projects. The mentioned issues in

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the verbatim data create divisions, mistrust, leadership wrangles and conflicts within the church congregation.

The findings are in tandem with Otieno (2019), Abuga (2020), Obebo (2022), Mutiso (2022) and Ogaro, et al. 2025) who posit that administrative conflicts in SEKEF continue to split the SDA church into two new church conflicting stations; namely Nyamonyo and Gotichaki. From the findings and the supporting literature, economic related conflicts are one of the most divisive issues within the SDA church in SEKEF leading to disunity, especially to leadership wrangles. This is an issue that the SDA church in SEKEF should not assume or ignore since they damage the reputation of the church, but instead should look for mechanisms to transform them for the unity of the church membership.

On the item of intra-ecclesial conflicts being caused by leadership and lust for power to control many aspects of the church, the findings from the questionnaire showed an overwhelming majority of 85 (87.6%) responses in support, 3 (3.1%) undecided, and 9 (9.3%) responses not in support. The view of the majority was also upheld by some respondents in the interviews who informed:

Leadership related conflicts are common in many religious communities, including the SDA Church. Such conflicts arise over the selection of leaders or the way some exercise their authority. In South East Kenya Field, these conflicts are influenced by local politics, tribal affiliations, perceptions of corruption, and all leading factions within the church (P40). Some church leaders are authoritarian in their leadership to the point that they do not listen to the ordinary church members. While some do not resist relinquishing the power, they always want to be in power even when their style of leadership is not appealing to the church membership (P12).

The field findings acknowledge the danger of bad leadership and lust for power in the SDA church in SEKEF. Some members may feel excluded or dissatisfied with the direction of church governance, leading to internal disputes. This is also exhibited in many leaderships related conflicts in the church that date back to the early church when in Corinth the believers argued over Paul and Apollo (I Corinthians 3:4). However, the General Conference of the SDA Church, which is the highest governing body, occasionally addresses intra-ecclesial conflicts through official statements, transformation, or clarifications of doctrine or church

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policy. There are Declarations which are aimed at guiding the church's position on contentious issues that could bring unhealthy conflicts within the church. For example, the debate over women's ordination has been a significant conflict within the SDA Church, and the General Conference has openly addressed it through votes and public statements. To iron out such leadership related issues, the top church leadership, regional conference, councils provided guidelines on how different regions can navigate the disagreement.

The findings are also supported by a substantive number of researchers. The findings are supported by Halverstadt (1991) who in his work entitled "Managing Church Conflict," informs that power struggles result from disparities in knowledge, convictions, interests, aspirations, ideals, and skills. The position that resonates with Burges (2002) who affirms that conflict and divisions in the church occur due to the powers given to wrong church leaders by the appointing authorities. The wrongly appointed leaders treat their churches like private property, exclusively co-owned and managed by spouses, close family members and friends. And also, Chacha (2010) contends that even though politics is all about power and control of resources, politicization of Christians by church leaders for self-interests (power and resource control) is a critical issue that does to allow for any positive change in the church. Those behind it do not allow any consensus on the implementation of laid down procedures that could lead to cohesion among divided factions in the church. Such selfish ambitions continue to fuel divisions and conflicts among Christians, and church leadership.

While Chaves (2004) asserts that leadership is one of the major components of church conflicts that destroy the unity of the church membership. And Watt (2014) posits that leaders who have the overall responsibility for enucleating the objectives of the church including providing moral leadership, sometimes fail to ensure the vision of the church to their congregants and maintenance of positive functioning relationships within the church leading to conflicts and disruption of the unity of the church. Atieno (2019) and Ogaro, et al. (2025) inform that internal church conflicts are motivated by the interest to have leadership and economic power control, without any spiritual implications.

The study further looked at the item on differences in theological views as what defines intra-ecclesial conflicts that destroys the unity of the SDA church in SEKEF. The questionnaire field data showed that 26 (26.8%) respondents were in support, 8 (8.2%) were neutral, while a majority of 56 (57.7%) were of the view that differences in theological view do define the

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nature of intra-ecclesial conflicts in SEKEF. The view of the majority resonated with those from the interviews where a respondent asserted, "We have had different views on certain issues regarding certain observances, but we have not reached a point where those differences actually conflict us. This could be attributed to the clarity of our church teachings and exigencies of the church manual on the life of the SDA church." (P27).

The low support and many negating the thesis on differences in theological views suggest that respondents perceive this as less significant to warrant intra-ecclesial conflicts in SEKEF compared to others. Differences in theological views cannot be a serious concern for intra-ecclesial conflict transformation; however, they should not also be ignored in the reality of the SDA church in SEKEF as a participant in the interviews opined, "Differences in the interpretation of key SDA teachings have the potential to cause conflicts in the church. Members may have varying views on issues such as Sabbath observance, diet, or the role of church leadership, which if not properly handled can escalate to conflicts, especially when one group believes another is straying from established SDA doctrine." (P33).

The verbatim data informs that differences in theological views cannot also be washed away as it happened in some churches. For instance, despite the SDA church having a well-defined set of beliefs, but differences in the interpretation of specific doctrines sometimes leads to internal conflict. For example, debates over the role of Ellen White's writings, interpretations of prophecy, or issues related to lifestyle standards (e.g., diet, Sabbath observance) which tend to cause friction among members. In regions with diverse populations cultural or tribal clashes may emerge regarding worship styles, language, or community customs. However, in the SDA church, the reality of intra-ecclesial conflicts is not that different, which affect the unity and integrity of its membership. This resonates with the reality of the Anglican Church in Natal, where the Anglican Bishop Colenso because of his ecclesiological argument for universalism, and his theological radical declaration in 1862 that the Pentateuch was unhistorical, led to the breakup of the Anglican Church from the Church of England (Lewis (2007). These ecclesiological and theological differences affected the unity of the Anglican Church members to date.

On the theme of communication related conflicts, especially on poor communication of church matters, 58 (59.8%) respondents supported the postulate, 10 (10.3%) were undecided,

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while 29 (29.9%) were in disagreement that poor communication of church matters define conflicts in the SDA church in SEKEF. The informants informed the study that:

Communication is an important element in the church. However, based on some experiences there is much of misinformation. Issues, especially financially related ones are not properly communicated to the church membership. There is misinformation about the use of church resources, which causes tensions that lead to conflicts thereby destroying the unity of the church members (P48). Lack of clarity in communication is a recipe for gossip, rumours, and misinformation, which sometimes cause divisions and distrust in church members (P44).

The data depicts a moderate level of concern where poor communication in church affairs leads to serious consequences on the unity of the church membership, especially it brings confusion, misinterpretation of information, gossip, misinformation, gaps in church leadership and members, weak fellowship among members, and so forth. In such church members are deprived of talking real issues affecting them.

The field data is in tandem with Winslade & Monk (2000) who assert that communication and open dialogues "speak" to those involved in the conflict addressing their existential reality thereby constituting their personhood. Whenever, parties freely communicate and dialogue, it leads to the acknowledgement of the different narratives at play within any given conflict. This creates new possibilities that disputing parties can discover for change. From the lens of Lederach (2014), proper communication and open dialogues safeguard relationships and link the immediate problems giving rise to conflict with the underlying relational context, thereby enhancing the unity of disputants and the affected members. Whenever there are proper and productive communication and dialogues, there is always a profound understanding of the conflict, and it creates a platform to address issues that can lead to conflicts in the church membership.

On the matter of silence of the church on intra-ecclesial conflicts, the questionnaire findings indicate that 65 (67.0%) of the respondents were in support, affirming that there is silence in the church on issues of conflicts within her membership, 3 (3.1%) were undecided, while 29 (29.9%) were not of the opinion that the SDA church in SEKEF is silent on intra-ecclesial conflicts. In support of the view of the majority, participants in the interviews informed:

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The truth must be said. The SDA church, especially in SEKEF does not want to speak about internal conflicts ravaging the unity of the church. This is prompted by fear to speak and address what is ailing the church from within, especially when conflicts are affecting the church authorities (P23). When there is silence on matters dividing the church, it escalates into more conflicts as members may align themselves with different sides of the conflict, which in essence create reconciliatory rival groups within the church. Silence also impedes getting into the root causes of the problem that cause conflicts (P37).

The data is emphatic of the fact that when church, especially the leadership remains silent on internal conflicts of the church, it leads to serious consequences on the unity of the church membership. The data points such dangers like escalation of existing conflicts as the silence can be misconstrued to mean approval of the ongoing conflicts, which allows tensions to grow and divisions to deepen. The profound implication of this is the formation of factions in the church where members align themselves with different opposing sides of the conflict with rival groups. Silence also encourages gossip, speculation, rumours and misinformation, which all fuel misunderstandings among church members, making reconciliation impossible. This weakens the bonds of unity and fellowship among members of the church.

The field findings are supported by Gathuki (2015), Ondieki (2019), Otieno (2019), and Obebo (2022) citing the SDA Maxwell church (Nairobi Central Church) which was closed indefinitely not by the church leadership but rather by the government where the top SDA church leadership instead of taking the mantle to positively resolve the internal conflicts ailing the church remained silent leaving the courts to take up the process to resolve them. The field findings further find resonance with Frazer & Ghettas (2013) who inform that, in order to build a sustainable conflict transformation process, two factors must be taken into account: knowing the kind of change that is necessary and the conflict's actors. Informed by this view, the identification of the causes of conflicts by church actors and the needed type of change become a constructive way to deal with intra-ecclesial conflicts within the SDA church.

The study looked at divergent and intolerance to accommodate different viewpoints among church members as a defining factor of intra-ecclesial in the SDA church in SEKEF. The questionnaire findings showed that 78 (80.4%) of the respondents affirmed the postulate, 3

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(3.1%) were neutral, and 16 (16.5%) were of the contrary opinion. Participant in the interviews informed the study that:

The major source of conflicts if not handled is the inability to contain and tolerate different divergent opinions of others. There are those who tend to impose their views onto others. This is common with those in the high offices of authority within the church. Conflicts among lay membership of the church are easy to control, but to those in authority is the contrary. Sometimes the church mistakenly thinks that the solution to solve differences among leaders of the church is to break and form other local churches. But this is a serious mistake that continues to ignite further conflicts in the church. The church has to look for mechanisms to listen and contain those with different and sometimes uncompromising positions, without necessarily dividing them more by creating new church territories (P1). Diversity in views is a healthy thing in any institution, including the church in SEKEF. However, in most cases this is not considered a good thing, especially by those who are influential, and hold deep unsettled issues (P16).

The field data indicated intolerance as a relatively higher level of concern among church members. It is assertive of the fact that while diversity in views is a good thing for the church, intolerance toward differing opinions has the potential to create profound divisions and disputes among the church members. It can cause formation of differing factions and cliques since some members may refuse to accommodate the viewpoints of some members who might feel excluded and marginalized. This can lead to church splits into rival groups, which eventually weakens the overall unity of the church in SEKEF. Intolerance undermines healthy discussions on conflicting church matters, making it difficult to resolve conflicts within the church. The is in agreement with Mwagiru (2000), conflict is regarded as an endemic aspect of society, which suggests that conflict in one form or another is a necessary and persistent aspect of social interaction and society.

On divisive church politics, the questionnaire study data indicated that 72 (74.2%) respondents agreed on the existence of divisive church politics within the SDA church in SEKEF thereby causing conflicts in the church, 8 (8.2%) were undecided, while 17 (17.5%) held the contrary opinion. A participation in the interviews had to say:

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Divisive church politics is something that cannot be denied in the SEKEF. Such politics have created factions in the church, thereby destroying its revered unity. This in most cases is motivated by the lust for power, tribalism and age where conflicting factions are formed without any ground for reconciliation (P27). Sometimes we have conflicts of ideas between older and more traditional members of the church and the young generation known for its progressive nature. The young generation tends to push for changes in worship styles, leadership structures, or community involvement, while older members sometimes resist the proposed changes in favour of preserving traditional SDA practices. This generational gap eventually leads to disagreements and divisions in the church membership (P36). Moreover, external tribal political forces influence intra-ecclesial conflicts, where local and national politics get into church leadership. Political affiliations, either with local leaders or broader general politics is known to influence church members' allegiances and deepen some existing conflicts (P17).

The data (quantitative and verbatim) on internal politics in SEKEF showed a higher level of agreement with existence of conflicts which severely affect church unity. Such politics are motivated by leadership and power struggles (as a result of disagreements between pastors, church elders, and members over control), financial mismanagement (marked by mistrust, accusations, and division), resistance to change (conservative positions), and so forth. Many a time, there are tensions between conservative members who wish to strictly adhere to traditional interpretations of Adventist beliefs and progressive members who advocate for reform or a broader interpretation of church practices and social engagement. The tensions between the two groups lead to break splits thereby adversely destroying the unity of the church in SEKEF.

The study acknowledged existence of external politics that significantly impact the unity of the SDA church in SEKEF, where church members tend to associate themselves with particular politicians or political parties undermining their Christian and church identity that should supersede secular political affiliations. The feeling that a particular group church membership identifies itself with a particular political group or party alienates others who are not identified with it. Politicians use the church for personal gain, manipulating members to serve their political interests. Heated political factions within the church lead to anger, resentment and eventually, church splits, which weakens its unity. Thus, secular politics

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create divisions among the church members. But a politically divided church runs the risk of losing its moral voice in the community.

The findings are consistent with Corman (2014) who posits that unhealthy church politics give rise to vices like corruption and struggle for leadership positions where selfish interests and acquisition of church resources is the nucleating and governing principle. And also, with Ward (2012) who claims that influential members of the church sell their Christian identity to attain their personal political goals, they manipulate church members to ascend to power with the sole purpose of having access and control of church resources. The findings are further supported by Atieno (2019), Mwaura (2019), and Wangui (2020) who posit that there are many protracted wrangles and divisions in numerous churches in Kenya; the wrangles are injurious to the point that they divide the membership of the church.

The study further looked at the theme of corruption in the SDA church in SEKEF as a feature that explains intra-ecclesial conflicts. The questionnaire data indicated a high level of concern with an overwhelming majority of 80 (82.5%) respondents in support of the thesis on corruption in the church, 8 (8.2%) were not sure, while 9 (9.3%) held a contrary opinion. In relation to the above, participants informed the study that:

Corruption is not just in the secular society, rather is something present even in the Church. Therefore, it is wrong to deny the existence of corruption in the SDA church in SEKEF and claim that the church is immaculate. Corruption in the SEKEF takes different forms - economic, leadership, tribal. This is something that has bedevilled the church for long. There are cases when church officials embezzle church funds or give church leadership to particular preferred members and influence vulnerable church members to support them. But then, this creates a conflicting rift with those who do not condone their mischievous purposes (P19). Kenya is a country with diverse ethnic groups, and cultural differences sometimes spill into church operations. In some cases, intra-ecclesial conflicts in SEKEF reflect broader tribal divisions, with church members aligning with leaders or groups from their ethnic background. Profoundly, this tends to cause divisions the congregation, particularly in regions with a history of ethnic rivalry (P35).

The data points to the fact that corruption in the church, whether financial, moral or leadership related adversely injures the unity of church members. Members are divided into

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factions where there are those who support the corrupt leadership and those who oppose it. Those in given particular leadership positions use those positions to get more benefits for themselves, and those affiliated to them are given church positions for the same reasons of reaping more benefits. This is a palatable ground for gossip, rumour and accusations spread, causing more division among church members. But then this weakens the bond of fellowship among the same church believers. Corruption makes the SDA church lose its moral authority to preach and fight against social evils since it fails to practice what it teaches.

The findings are consistent with Corman (2014) who asserts that corruption and struggle for leadership positions where selfish indulgence and acquisition of church resources is the nucleating and governing principle in many churches today. On the same note, Chacha (2010) contends that even though politics is all about power and control of resources, politicization of Christians by church leaders for self-interests (power and resource control) is a critical issue that does to allow for any positive change in the church. This is because those behind it do not allow any consensus on the implementation of laid down procedures that could lead cohesion among divided factions in the church. Such selfish ambitions have continued to fuel divisions and conflicts among Christians, church leadership and even churches. While Otieno (2019) posits that numerous bad cases among the clergy, which include immorality, sexual assault and abuse, tribalism and nepotism as well as incapacitated leaders who are completely unable to lead and guide the church in the right direction generate serious divisions in the church and contribute toward impeding efforts for transformation for the unity of church members.

Finally, the study discussed the item on confusion and unclear roles in the church as a defining factor of intra-ecclesial conflicts in SEKEF. The questionnaire field data showed a relatively lower response of 20 (20.6%) in support, 1 (1.0%) was undecided; while an overwhelming majority of 76 (78.4%) denied the thesis on confusion and unclear roles in the church as a cause of conflicts in SEKEF. A participant in the interviews informed:

In the SDA church manual, church roles are clearly defined; each officer knows what he/she is supposed to do once elected into office or given a particular position in the church. In fact, this has been a formidable source of unity and direction for the church since its inception; it has helped to iron-out possible areas of conflicts within the hierarchy of the church. It is

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therefore pretentious to think that in SEKEF there is confusion and unclear definition of roles leading to church conflicts in the Field (P39).

The lower response rate in support of confusion and unclear roles in the church as what defines intra-ecclesial conflicts in SEKEF indicates this issue to be of less or of a moderate concern, not among the most pressing problems within the church. However, it is an issue that cannot be ignored since it had few participants in support. When roles and responsibilities within the church are not clearly defined, it can lead to confusion and conflicts among office bearers there could be overlaps and some members may try to assert their authority, leading to power struggles. Thus, the SDA church in SEKEF has to stick to continue ensuring that roles in the church are clearly defined and those in office merit it.

Despite the various responses for and against the study themes of objective one on the nature of intra-ecclesial conflicts in SEKEF, much of the field findings was in agreement with Pope Francis (2013) who explains that conflicts in the church should not be ignored or concealed; rather they should be acknowledged, and transformed for the sole purpose of the unity of the church and for individual church member development. Further, the findings are in tandem with McSwain (2013) who posits 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 opt for the evasive approach of avoidance. But this approach is only effective in the short term and cannot be used to find lasting responses to deep seated conflicts that require transformation for positive change in the church. Further, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of intra-ecclesial conflicts in SDA church in SEKEF as discussed in this paper is important for their transformation. This is in agreement with Kriesberg (2011) who highlights that taking into consideration all conflict-related matters allow the formulation of suitable measures for all involved parties, as they provide direction for the methods used in the transformation of the conflict in question. Thus, intra-ecclesial conflicts should be viewed as an opportunity for the growth of the church, especially when those conflicts are transformed into a positive force for the church's mission.

CONCLUSION

From the above evidence analysis of the empirical findings, the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church is obviously facing an attack from a slew of intra-ecclesial conflicts as evidenced by the high level of consensus (92.8%) of the respondents in the study. These

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conflicts however are not uniformed and can be mild or severe, and local or more widespread. The first factor cited by 82.5% of the respondents is the corrosive nature of institutional corruption, which erodes the trustworthiness of the fiduciary nature and also the moral and spiritual legitimacy of church officials. These are closely related to the other overlapping aspects of ideological intolerance and ecclesiastical partisanship: 80.4% say that there is a lack of hermeneutical charity, and 74.2% say that there is an excessive tendency to factional politicking that hinders the unity of the Church. While theological disagreements are historically significant in ecclesial discussions, they are the least significant source of tension, but only 26.8% of respondents said theological issues were there in the first place, while the misuse of ecclesiastical resources (72.2%) was another source of tension.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The responsibility of the administrative hierarchy and pastoral leadership of the SDA Church in SEKEF is to go beyond palliative actions and develop a comprehensive multi-faceted framework of remedial actions. First, the church needs to urgently put in place an independent, transparent and enforceable anti-corruption mechanism comprising periodic church audits, public disclosure of asset utilization, and unequivocal sanctions for malfeasance in order to regain the confidence of all stakeholders and ensure the sanctity of stewardship. Concurrently, a culture of deliberative pluralism, a culture of dialogue and conflict-resolution, and a culture of formal grievance-redress processes that enable dissent without capitulation to schism need to be encouraged. Also, the corrosive influence of partisanship and patronage in the selection of appointed leaders should be addressed by making the selection process less partisan and more spiritual discernment and merit based than being connected to a region or a patron. Lastly, theological differences have not been as stark as in other settings, but not ignored either: they should be dealt with in ongoing hermeneutical seminars where the denomination's key convictions are the centre point of discussion; where an approach is centred in rather than centrifugal; and where there is a doctrinal unity within diversity. All these recommendations, taken together, have the capacity not only to resolve the current conflicts but also to re-position the SEKEF SDA Church in the main framework of its mission-mandate, to make use of the challenges to the institutional renewal of the church and to prophetically witness.

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