

Perceptions on Witnessing in the Zimbabwe West Union Conference of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

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The Personal Ministries of the Zimbabwe West Union Conference

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ABSTRACT

Despite attempts by the Adventist church in the Zimbabwe West Union Conference to train and motivate its church members to be involved in witnessing, many of them remain passive. This study therefore sought to find out the perceptions of the members on the witnessing process and to proffer suggestions that would see all church members being actively involved in this divine calling. This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. Open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions were the means through which data was collected. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and reported according to emerging themes. Findings showed that about eight-three percent of the participants believe that when one is saved witnessing will naturally be an outflow of the salvation experience. Forty percent of the participants indicated that there is very little written by Seventh-day Adventists on witnessing for Christ hence they lack adequate information to aid them in witnessing. As a result of this lack of clear information there are misguided views concerning the practice of witnessing like the belief that it is for a few gifted people, not everyone. The foregoing findings entailed the study to recommend leadership in all levels of the church to help church membership adopt the biblical witnessing model.

Keywords: evangelism, witnessing, proclamation, social action, prospect

INTRODUCTION

The Adventist church believes in the nearness of the second advent of Christ and that the gospel must be preached to the whole world prior to this great event (Mat 24:14; Rev. 14:14). The church further believes that it has the present truth gospel to broadcast to the world. This present truth gospel is enshrined in the three angels' message Rev.14 v 6-14. The second advent of Christ is to be preceded by the verbal proclamation of the threefold message. That the message will be verbally proclaimed is attested by the following terms "the eternal gospel to proclaim (Rev. 14: 6)" the second followed "saying fallen, fallen is Babylon (Rev. 14:8)" and the third "followed them, saying with a loud voice. (Rev. 14:9)." According to Burrill (1998) Adventists have always identified themselves with this threefold message and have seen it as their responsibility to proclaim it to the world to prepare a people for the soon coming Jesus. While witnessing constitutes the life, the deeds and the words of the witness, the threefold message (Revelation 14:6-14) seems to show that verbal witness of the church will be central prior to the second coming of Christ (Revelation 14:14). It is however disturbing that the Adventists seem to have slackened on this important expectation of theirs. While the church teaches that during New Testament times witnessing seems to have been for all believers it appears that in current Adventist churches in ZWUC it is seen as a practice of a few gifted ones and or the pastorate. Some of the churches have witnessing teams and not every member is involved in witnessing. Membership seems to look to these teams to do the witnessing. It therefore becomes the object of this research study to find out the causes of church members' reluctance to be involved in witnessing. The research will also proffer strategies that the church should implement as to motivate its members to realize and be involved in their key duty as church members.

Demographic Background of Zimbabwe West Union Conference

The Zimbabwe West Union Conference is located on the western part of Zimbabwe covering three provinces namely Bulawayo, Matabeleland South and Matabeleland North. It has seven urban centres

among them the second largest city in Zimbabwe, Bulawayo and three border towns namely Beit Bridge, Plumtree and Victoria Falls. This union brings together many people groups based on different cultures, ethnicity, professionalism, business trades, languages and religious affinity.

It is important to note that although the inhabitants of this city are of different social and economic backgrounds, they all aspire the same human needs, like the desire of good health, the prosperity and family tranquillity among others. This union has 948, 825 people accounting for the 6 % of 15, 1 million which is the total population of Zimbabwe. Bulawayo province has the highest figure standing at 665, 940 followed by Matabeleland north with 159, 982 people while Matabeleland South has 122,903 people. Matabeleland south has an interesting observation as the only province that has more males than females. It has 62, 124 males compared to 60,779 females. This could be that more females are moving out of this province to seek greener pastures elsewhere or more males are moving in this province for opportunities in mining and farming. Seventh-day Adventist membership in this Union stands at 125, 249, representing 14% of the population in the region covered by the region. There is however more to be done in penetrating some unentered areas (and people groups) within the union. In terms of the age divisions the children section of 0-14 year bracket is the highest followed by the youths bracket of 19- 35 years. The 55 and above age bracket has the least people. The modal age of this union is 46 years showing that the age of influence is between 30 and 46 years. There are four universities, three Teachers' colleges and several technical colleges within the Union, making it rich in terms of higher learning institutions. In terms of employment, formal employment accounts for about 20% while the rest are under informal employment, self-employment and unemployed. The most common informal activities in urban areas include transport, vending, money laundering while in rural areas is small mining, farming and firewood selling.

The knowledge of the demographics of this union helps the church to reach out its population in the best possible means. White (1912) insists that the church was organised for service and its mission is to spread the gospel to the world. While we wait for the blessed day of His Second Coming, God wants His churches to be a Centre of Hope from which full healing and abundant life flows to the neighbouring communities. He wants to work with us and through us to revitalize and transform the weary and depressed lives into hopeful lives awaiting the glorious day.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper exegetes some Bible passages like Acts 9:1-31, 22:1-21; 26:12-22 that refer to how the apostle Paul witnessed. Act 9 is a narrative of Paul's journey to Damascus when he met the resurrected Jesus. Every witness must have an encounter with Jesus. The encounter results not only in a moral transformation but also a change of mission. Nichol explains that the sudden change in the life of Paul was due to the discovery that Jesus was the Messiah. Furthermore, Paul realized that when he persecuted the church he fought against God. This accounts for his sudden change from a persecutor to an apostle. When he gained his sight after Ananias' prayer, Paul immediately began to preach Christ (Acts 9:20).

This road to Damascus experience so impacted on the life of Paul, that whenever he testified about Jesus he would refer to it. His emphasis was that although he was never with Jesus in His earthly ministry like the twelve he actually met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul did refer to the Damascus experience in his testimonial sermons in Act 22:21; 26:12-22. These testimonial sermons served to validate his witness.

Any witness would influence their prospects if they have had an encounter with Jesus like Paul and would not merely be relating cognitive facts about Christ.

We have examples of individuals who changed their worldviews and became witnesses of Jesus after their encounter with Him. The woman of Samaria suddenly began to witness for Christ after her encounter with

Him at the well (John 4), the Gerasene's demoniac was told by Jesus to go to tell others what the Lord had done for him (Mark 5:1-20) and the man who had been blind immediately began to witness about Christ after his eyes were opened (John 9).

The woman of Samaria was so keen to share the news about her new, great discovery that she left her jar of water at the well (John 4:28). Nichol (1978) says "She had experienced desire, conviction, and decision and the next logical step was action -she went to tell others of her great discovery." This is natural to all witnesses who have had a genuine encounter with Jesus. It was also the case with the blind man whose eyes were opened by Jesus (John 9:1- 38). After his healing the man immediately began to witness.

One of the misconceptions on witnessing is that one can witness successfully through their exemplary lives even without verbal proclamation. The apostles' witness which comprised giving their verbal testimony to the resurrection of Jesus and meeting the material needs of people (Acts 4:33-34) provides a balanced view of a holistic witness. Despite the preaching of the gospel Paul encouraged the gentile churches to send food relief to the churches in Judea (Galatians 2:10; Acts 11:15). Evangelism by Jesus and the apostles in the early church involved verbal proclamation, teaching, miracles of healing, personal witness and testimony. The miracles of healing served to validate verbal proclamation in witnessing. Dyrness and Karkkainen (1975) insist that evangelism goes beyond words and they see social activity or responsibility as a partner to evangelism through words, like the two wings of a bird working together. However, verbal witness must be backed by an exemplary life if it must effectively impact on the community. A Christian witness should live out their lives in such a way that they share Christ through both words and deeds.

Flemming (2013) sees Christian witness as a whole multifaceted understanding of mission which touches the whole range of human needs. He then argues that witnessing comprises of being, doing and telling. The word "being" points to a lifestyle. One who is in Christ will inevitably engage in "doing" what Jesus did. Like Jesus a Christian witness will perform acts of kindness like feeding the hungry and dressing the naked. The "telling" aspect refers to verbal witness. The lifestyle of the witness will lead people to ask them to give the reason for the hope that is in them (1 Peter 3:15). Therefore being a witness precedes doing and telling.

Accordingly, this paper defines witnessing as,

leading unbelievers to a saving relationship with Jesus (by one with an experiential knowledge of Jesus) through verbally teaching and proclaiming the word, meeting people's needs and living a life that evidences that Christianity gives meaning and purpose to life.

The following deductions can be made from this definition:

- The witness has an experiential knowledge of Jesus
- The witness shares their experience.
- The spiritually bankrupt have no experience to
- The witness shares Christ through both living a convincing life and verbal proclamation and teaching the word.

Unbelievers must be convinced through observing the life of a witness that Christianity works, gives purpose and meaning in life. They are looking for something that will positively transform their lives resulting in a purposeful and satisfying life. Ratz (1972) says;

The people to whom you witness are not interested in learning about a new religion. They are interested in something that works, something that will affect their way of living. They want reality. They want a new force in their lives that will influence their thoughts, their actions, and above all, give them happiness and a purpose for living.

What triggers witnessing?

Witnessing is an overflow of a life that babbles out of excitement exuding from gratefulness for what Christ has done for the believer. The woman of Samaria spontaneously left the jar of water and ran into the city to tell people what the Lord had done for her (John 4:1-35). It must be noted that after his encounter with Jesus and baptism Paul the apostle immediately began to witness for Christ (Acts 9:20). The two demon possessed men (Mark 5:1-20) also began to witness about Christ immediately after deliverance from demons. Concerning the testimonies of these men about Jesus, White E.G. (1911) comments

They could not instruct the people as the disciples who had been daily with Christ were able to do. But they bore in their own persons the evidence that Jesus was the Messiah. They could tell what they knew; what they themselves had seen, and heard, and felt of the power of Christ.

What Motivates One to Witness?

The motivation to witness is born out of a living relationship with Jesus and the difference Christ has made in the life of a witness as noted in the experiences of Paul, the woman of Samaria, the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20) (John 4:1-35)) and the man whose eyes were opened (John 9:1-27)). Furthermore, the response of a witness to crisis convinces prospects about the power and truthfulness of the Gospel. This is especially true when they see the different way Christian witnesses respond to problems with which everyone struggles. Paul and Silas could pray and sing hymns while in prison. Such praises attracted the attention of the other inmates. Luke records that these inmates, "...were listening to them (Acts 16:25)." The response of the apostles to the crisis aroused the prisoner's attention. The SDA commentary explains, "the inner prison held other occupants, outcasts and criminals who had never before heard such sounds in a place that naturally echoed the wild curses and foul jests." The joy of Paul and Silas in prison attracted the attention of the inmates and the jailer who later converted and was baptised with his family. Paul and the other apostles would continue proclaiming the resurrection despite threats from authorities. This courage served to convince people about the truthfulness of the resurrection and that Christianity is worth embracing.

Wharton (1976) writes,

One convincing evidence that Jesus had indeed been raised was that all twelve of the apostles under threats from the hierarchy, who very well held the power to pass the death sentence, nevertheless, persisted in their preaching that the resurrection was a fact to which they were eyewitnesses. They could not stop preaching it though it would cost their lives.

Such reckless courage which could lead to martyrdom proved that their testimony was not a fabrication but an authentic event. The resurrection of Christ has been propelling Christians throughout history. Many saints have been calm in the face of death because of the belief that there is life after death. Such a hope has made Christianity attractive hence giving witnesses courage to push on against odds.

The apostle John appears to assert that anyone who believes in Jesus is born in them the desire to share Him. Jesus said, "...The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:14)." The same words Jesus uttered when he said, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water (John 7:38)." Concerning these texts Siegfried H. Horn (1979) comments that only the one in living communion with Christ becomes himself a center of spiritual influence. This influence is exerted in the community through words and deeds. White E. G. (1912) seems to concur with this when she says, "Every true disciple is born into the kingdom as a missionary." In every born-again believer there is a desire to share Christ with others. Witnessing is more than an intellectual process of giving factual information but a transformational process. Many have failed to witness because they seem to operate on the cognitive domain and are devoid of spiritual life.

The Role of Meditation

The witness needs time alone with God to discern the divine will and mission for them. Paul says that he was not taught his gospel by man but received it by revelation (Galatians 1:17). Paul had abundant revelations of Jesus in Arabia (2 Cor. 12:7, Gal. 1:17) After his conversion Paul went to Arabia. Ellen White explains:

He (Paul) went into Arabia; and there, in comparative solitude, he had ample opportunity for communion with God and for contemplation. He wished to be alone with God, to search his own heart, to deepen his repentance, and to prepare himself by prayer and study to engage in a work which appeared to him too great and too important for him to undertake.

Witnesses must have time with God as a means of preparation for their ministry. It seems this was time for prayer, meditation, and study. A witness receives training from man but there are extra lessons to be learned from God in isolation.

Role of Holy Spirit

All witnessing endeavours of the early church were initiated and directed by the Holy Spirit. They were not merely dependent on human initiative. The spirit guided Paul past Asia, Mysia and Bythia and finally to Europe (Acts 16:6). While the Holy Spirit had a leading role Paul believed in the safety of the counsel of many advisors (Proverbs 11:14). It was Paul alone who had been shown the vision of the man of Macedonia (Acts 16:9), yet he must have revealed the vision to his team which together with him must have concluded that God's will was for them to go to Macedonia. While directed to Macedonia in a vision he appears to have consulted with his team which concluded that the Spirit was directing them to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:9). Whereas Darrell L. Bock (2007) sees the use of "we" (Acts 16:10) as suggesting that Luke had joined the scene. It may also imply that they discerned as a team that the Holy Spirit was directing them to go to Macedonia. Prior to this event the Spirit had requested that Barnabas and Saul be set apart for Him for the work which He had called them (Acts 13:2). The angel also at one time directed Phillip to witness to the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26). While witnesses may use human reasoning, they must learn to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit to guide them to the prospects.

Witnessing Outside Church Programs

Paul saw witnessing as a lifestyle. It is not confined to a particular place and time. Paul would reach out to people wherever they were as opposed to some believers today who wait for people to attend meetings arranged by their churches so that they witness to them. In Athens while he waited for Silas and Timothy, "he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there." (Acts 17:16-17). While waiting for his companions he occupied himself with witnessing to the Jews and the devout people. Greear (2015) says there is need to reach people apart from meetings and events. When church members are only seen witnessing only during evangelistic campaigns arranged by the church, the community may become suspicious of their motives.

Another effective way of witnessing is through informal day to day conversation as opposed to formal presentation of canned doctrines in organized meetings. This seems to be what Hildreth and McKinion (2020) call "life-style evangelism" which according to them means "developing a life-style that enables gospel conversations to flow naturally through all the relationships we have." It appears that information delivered through informal relational conversations has greater impact than that given by formal presentations.

Witnessing to People Without Disturbing their Daily Businesses

The Christian witnesses in the early church used to reach out to people in their locations. They would not

wait for people to come to its meeting places. Paul could get to the homes of people to study the Bible with them (Acts 20:20). The incident of the Ethiopian Eunuch also illustrated how the early Christians could reach out to people without interfering with their daily programs. Philip joined the Ethiopian Eunuch “And he besought Philip to come up and sit with him (Acts 8:31).” The journey of the Ethiopian Eunuch was never interrupted.

Paul would approach people where they were to witness to them. He met the Jews in the synagogue and the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers at the Areopagus Hall. He testified about Christ to the Jews in their synagogues (Acts 13:42; 17:2; 18:4), as a prisoner to his fellows (Acts 16:25-34, 24:22-27) in the Areopagus to the Greek philosophers (Acts 17:22-33), and in the ship that sailed to Rome Paul could comfort, counsel, exhort and heal the sick (Acts 28:8). At his final imprisonment in Rome Paul rented an apartment in which for two years he taught those who came to him (Acts 28:30). There are times Paul would conduct formal Bible studies from house to house and in public places (Acts 13:44; 20:20). Aquilla and Pricilla arranged Bible studies with Apollos when they noticed that he did not have a complete gospel. E Myers Harrison and Walter L. Wilson (1952) comment that it was the supreme concern of every believer, every day in the year, in every place, in the church, on the street, in the marketplace, in people’s homes Christian witnesses reached out to unbelievers by instruction, preaching, letter writing and personal contact.

Use of Technology in Witnessing

Paul wished to minister to the people face to face but where it was impossible, he used the technology of the day. He would write letters or send messengers to his churches. He wrote, “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift... Romans 1:11.” the same attitude is exhibited by John when he writes, “I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face (1John1:13). Pen and ink were the technology of the time. If Paul and the other apostle could not meet their congregations face to face, they could communicate with them through writing letters which seems to have been the technology of their day. Reaching to people through online platforms like WhatsApp Bible studies, face book, twitter and Instagram could be another way of evangelizing. People could be reached through these methods at the comfort of their homes. In a fast-paced world in which people are ever busy in pursuit of money the witness of Christ must adapt their evangelistic strategies to changing circumstances.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate perceptions of Seventh-day Adventist church members in the Zimbabwe West Union Conference (ZWUC).

The descriptive research design enabled the researchers to gather data on different perceptions the respondents had regarding witnessing.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study were Seventh-day Adventist church members in ZWUC. The researchers employed a stratified purposive sampling technique to select 200 church members from different people groups that make up the church membership. The different people groups comprised Pastors, Church Elders, Adults and Youths from urban, peri-urban and rural churches. The inclusion of different people groups enabled the researchers to get the holistic view on participants’ perceptions regarding witnessing. Table 1 shows the composition of the participants who took part in this study.

Table 1: Distribution of participants

CATEGORY	NUMBER	JUSTIFICATION
Pastors	10	Give direction and shape the thinking of church members
Church Elders	20	Leaders in the church, their perceptions are very crucial
Adults	80	These compose the old school in the church. Have valuable experience about the church and evangelism related programs.
Youths	90	These are the majority of the church population. Their views shape the church both in the now and in the future.

Research Instruments

To address the research problem, relevant data was generated using a questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with church members. The questionnaire had two sections; section A required the demographic information for the participants whilst the section B contained nine close-ended questions. The close-ended questions were mainly the Likert type which required participants to give a rating to the given statement. The researchers also used the FGD to afford the participants with opportunity to express their views on the issues of witnessing. The FGD were a follow up to check the consistency of participants' responses and also to clarify some responses from the questionnaires. Ten FDGs comprising 6-10 participants were conducted in churches located in urban, peri-urban and rural areas. This enabled the researchers to have a wholistic picture on church members perceptions regarding witnessing.

Reliability and Validity

The two research instruments, questionnaires and focus group discussions, were content validated by the two research experts and the corrections were made accordingly before the instruments were finally used in the main study. The questionnaire's reliability was tested using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient index. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient index estimates the internal consistency of the questionnaire by determining how the items are related to each other as a group (Creswell, 2015). The value obtained was 0.74 and hence the questionnaire was deemed reliable. To ensure that the research findings are credible and trustworthy so that they can be beneficial to other researchers and interested parties, the research instruments were pilot tested. According to Merriam (2015), pilot study is a small-scale study done to refine the research instruments before the main study. The questionnaire was pilot tested using ten church members who were not part of final study.

The purpose of the pilot study was to identify inadequacies, inconsistencies and ambiguities in the questionnaire before it was finally used in the main study. This also allowed the researchers to redesign some questions that brought ambiguity before the actual study. The researchers also pilot-tested the focus group interview guide with a mock focus group. The aim was to structure questions so that they were clear and stimulating discussion. Some questions in the FGD guide were revised before the guide was ready to be used.

Data Analysis

The data collected using questionnaires was quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data from close-ended questions in the questionnaires was analyzed using Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version computer software. The quantitative data was analyzed through descriptive statistics using frequencies and percentages. The quantitative data was presented in frequency tables and bar charts for easy interpretation. Responses from focus group discussions formed qualitative data and analyzed thematically.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the findings from collected data about the participants' perceptions on issues regarding witnessing. The themes that emerge from data collected are valuable indicators of possible perceptions held by the church members. The section begins by looking at the demographic information of the church members who participated in this study.

Demographic Information

The demographic information reflects the vital attributes of the population which forms the basis under which the researchers obtained pertinent data. The demographic of the participants are therefore important in understanding their responses regarding witnessing. This data assisted the researchers with the information on the knowledge and level of understanding of the participants regarding witnessing. In addition, the researchers considered biographical information essential so as to know the calibre of people who would help in uncovering the phenomenon under study. The researchers were interested in the following demographic variables: age, gender, educational level, marital status, employment status, residential place and their length of membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Table 2 below shows the demographic analysis of the participants.

Table 2: Demographic data for the participants

Variables	Description of the variables	Frequency (N=200)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	108	54
	Females	92	46
Age	16-21 years	46	23
	22-35 years	71	36
	36-45 years	50	15
	46-70 years	53	26
Educational Level	Primary	18	9
	Secondary	86	43
	Tertiary	79	40
	Other	17	9
Employment Status	Formal	61	31
	Informal	15	7
	Unemployed	26	13
	Self Employed	41	20
	Student	57	28
Marital Status	single	98	49
	Married	89	44
	Widowed	5	3
	Divorced	5	3
	Other	3	1
Length of church membership	1-10 years	47	24
	11-20 years	65	32
	21-30 years	36	18
	Above 30 years	52	26

Data in the table 2 indicates that the sample consisted of 46% female and 54% male participants. From this data, there were more males than females. This may be due to the fact that the study purposively selected male Elders and Pastors. Gender was an important variable in this study since the researchers wanted the opinion and views from both genders. Data also indicated that the majority (44.4%) of the church members that participated in this study were in the age bracket of 22-35 years. It appears that the majority of participants were the active age group.

Data also reveals that the majority of participants (76%) have been Seventh-day Adventist members for over 10 years. Since the majority of participants have been in the church for a long time, it is assumed they are knowledgeable on issues to do with witnessing.

Participants Understanding of Witnessing

The participants were asked to show their understanding of what witnessing is. They were to give a rating on a scale of 1 to 5 on given statements to show their understanding of witnessing. Their responses are shown in the Table 3.

Table 3: Participant’s Understanding of Witnessing

S/N	Statement	Total rating	Rank
1	Going house to house telling people about Christ.	613	4
2	Sharing a testimony on how Christ saved you or what Christ did for you	630	3
3	Distribution of Christian literature	607	5
4	Doing acts of kindness	671	2
5	Sharing Christ through personal testimonies, living an exemplary Christ-like life, teaching and preaching the word	704	1

Table 3 reveals that majority of the participants perceived witnessing as sharing Christ through personal testimonies, living an exemplary Christ-like life, teaching and preaching the word. This was further supported by participants’ responses from focus group discussions. This is what the participants said:

Taking the word of God everywhere, whether people know the word or not (FGD 1)

Visiting people and sharing the word of God (FGD 3).

Telling someone your experiences with Christ (FGD 4).

Sharing Christ in deeds or sharing your Christian walk (FGD 5).

Sharing what you know about Jesus, not what you have heard (FGD 6).

Going door to door talking or telling people about Christ (FGD 7).

Taking the word of God to those who haven’t heard. Approaching someone who hasn’t had the same view about Christ, trying to convince them about your view. Having a conversation with someone where you feel there is a need (FGD 8).

There was a wide range of responses pertaining to how witnessing is understood by different church members. Most participants pointed out that they thought that witnessing is going (as a group or as an individual) door to door telling people about or sharing the word of God. This definition sounds more of a church organized Bible study than witnessing. We become witnesses to something we have seen or experienced rather than becoming messengers of other people’s experiences. As varied as the responses

were, they were all similar in nature and not far from each other. All expressed the thought that the central figure in our witnessing is pointing to Christ and introducing Christ to an individual. While the sentiments were similar in all people groups the adults across geographical divide emphasized on the visitation aspects. To them witnessing is more of door-to-door visitations. Young people brought in the idea of the use of social media into the whole process. Some youths, however, sounded as if they were introducing a Christ who was not personal to them. This can be drawn from the response:

“Sharing what you have heard about Jesus Christ.”

This almost sounds like introducing Christ in the third party and not in a personal sense. This could be the reason why members of the SDA church do not participate in witnessing, as Christ is not personal to them but someone they have heard of. This is in direct contrast to the definition of witnessing given by Tshuma (2023), who defines it as leading a person to a saving relationship with Jesus (by one with an experiential knowledge of Jesus) through verbally teaching and proclaiming the word, meeting people’s needs and living a life that evidences that Christianity gives meaning and purpose to life. Very few participants have this holistic view of witnessing.

Participants Views on Witnessing

The participants were further interrogated on who should do witnessing. Their responses are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Participants views on witnessing

S/N	Who should do witnessing?	Total rating	Rank
1	A few gifted individuals.	193	3
2	Pastors, elders and other trained church workers	273	2
3	People who are not working	153	4
4	All church members, young and old	747	1

Interestingly, the majority of the participants highlighted that witnessing should be done by all church members, whether young or old even though not everyone participated in witnessing. This was further supported by one participant who said:

Witnessing is the responsibility of every Christian. It is not restricted to certain select people such as fulltime Christian workers, evangelists, Pastors but every church member is called to be a “fisher of men.” (Participant 62)

In as much as all participants unanimously agreed that every church member should participate in witnessing, there was a consensus that a very small group of the church members is actually doing in witnessing. In many churches there is a standing group of people who normally form the core of the visitation team during the set evangelistic campaigns of the church usually done in May and September. To many church members this has been seen as the only time to do witnessing. This kind of thinking ties up with the general perception that was coming out through the research that witnessing is a church organised programme. Responses like, ‘there are too many programmes from higher church structures that crowd witnessing’ were confirming the perception that witnessing is a church planned and administered programme. Witnessing is an individual initiative done outside church programme. During focus group discussions participants even after saying witnessing is for all church members could not confess that as individuals they had participated. In FGD 4 out of 10 participants only 2 participants confessed being activate in witnessing. This demonstrates that while most of the church members appreciate that witnessing is for all they are not participating as individuals but as a church. Nichol (1980) talking about the Samaritan woman says, “She had experienced desire, conviction, and decision and the next logical step was action she

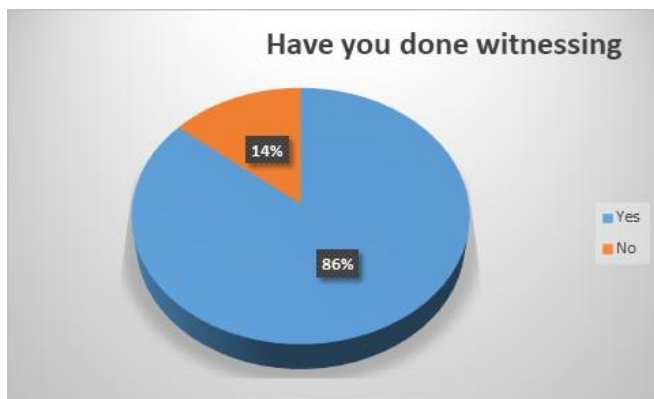
went to tell others of her great discovery.” This should be the natural outcome to any Christian who has had an encounter with Christ. It was also the case with the blind man whose eyes were opened by Jesus (John9:1-41). After his healing the man immediately began to witness. For witnessing to be effective it should be seen as an individual initiative not a church program.

People who have an understanding about Christ and answer questions about Christ (FGD 9).

Some participants were of the view that in as much as witnessing was supposed to be done by everyone some were better placed than others to witness. There were two perspectives backing this view. Firstly the fact that some are better in speech than others and secondly some do not have a full understanding of the Bible as yet. This hinted to the laziness and lack of clarity on what witnessing pertains on the part of church members as the stated reasons do not fail someone to witness. Believers are at different levels of understanding the Bible and some articulate the teachings of the Bible better than others. Despite the fact that believers are at different levels of understanding the Bible and abilities to present its teachings those who have not been exposed to the fundamental beliefs may begin to witness immediately after their conversion like Legion (Mark 5:1-20), the woman of Samaria (John 4), and the man born blind (John 9:1-38). This is because for one to be a witness there is no need to be good in speech or to become an expert in a certain field. What is needed is to share one’s experience.

The study also sought if the participants had done witnessing. This was necessary so that they could further give the methods they used for witnessing. In addition, they would indicate which methods were more effective. The information is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Shows the response on whether they have done witnessing



The figure 1 shows that most of the participants had done witnessing.

Table 5: Witnessing methods used by the participants

S/N	Methods of witnessing used by Participants?	Total rating	Rank
1	Bible study	321	1
2	Literature distribution	269	5
3	Personal experience	258	6
4	Invitation to church/ outreach campaign	289	4
5	Doing acts of kindness	296	3
6	Witnessing through an exemplary lifestyle	312	2

Most participants indicated they used Bible study as a means of witnessing. This was supported by the data from the focus group discussions. There were various witnessing methods that came up during the focus

group discussions. The most frequented methods were; our characters and lifestyles, needs based witnessing (including doing acts of kindness), distributing literature and doing Bible studies. These were the methods recorded in all the focus groups. It reflects what is actually perceived on the ground. Another method of witnessing that was suggested was that the church should experience a revival and that on its own would be a witness for Christ. This was an intriguing insight as it gave light to why some churches with perceived ‘revivals’ do better in terms of witnessing than SDAs. Another method to note was the suggestion of having a prayer or devotional segment after public meetings. On the method of acts of kindness it was realized that while it was mentioned in both questionnaire and focus group discussions it was not well understood. Many members narrated that they were visiting homes and giving out goods of different natures. Good as it is, this might not constitute witnessing, this is just a donation that any other person or organisation can do. The acts of kindness should be used as entry points for witnessing not to be ends in their own.

It was disturbing to note that in most cases the participants especially in focus group discussions preferred to shun talking about their experiences preferring to generalize issues or use examples of other members. This gave an impression that most of them were not witnessing. Tshuma (2023) emphasises that, the spiritually bankrupt cannot share this experience. This highlights that only those who have had personal encounters with Jesus are capable of being genuine witnesses of Christ. The other area that brought exciting findings was the most effective methods of witnessing. The invitationsto church outreach campaigns was said to be the most effective method of witnessing. Some people confuse inviting people to evangelistic campaigns for witnessing. Personal witness should be done first to the people we invite to church programmes rather than relying on these invitations as our key witnessing strategies. Table 6 captures the responses of the participants on the most effective witnessing methods.

Table 6. Views on which is most effective witnessing method

S/N	Most effective method of witnessing	Total rating	Rank
1	Bible Study	316	3
2	Literature distribution	288	4
3	Personal experience	283	5
4	Invitation to church/outreach campaign	278	6
5	Doing acts of kindness	324	1
6	Witnessing through an exemplary lifestyle	317	2

There was once again a huge consensus among participants that doing acts of kindness was the most effective method of witnessing. This was collaborated by data from the focus group discussions. However, participants acknowledge that the SDA church and its members have not done well in this regard. This then raises a question if this was said to be an effective method on paper and not practically proven or it is an easy method or there is some other factor? This could be a hint that this method is not done properly, perhaps the church is dumping gifts and not creating relationships with the community or maybe our acts of kindness are not rightly executed or planned.

Another method that received a general consensus was witnessing through an exemplary lifestyle. The participants agreed that the ill behavior of church members counteracted the efforts to win souls to Christ. Furthermore, small groups were suggested as another effective witnessing. A participant in another focus group suggested using age groups to witness; it would be easier for a teenager to witness to another teenager. In one focus group a respondent suggested that our methods should be restructured and maybe using technology would be top consideration. Another participant said the best and most effective method is a combination of many methods and not just simply one. The study further asked how often they witnessed. The information is shown in Figure 2. The frequency of witnessing indicates the participant’s perceptions on issues regarding witnessing.



Figure 2: Showing frequency of witnessing

The information from the Figure 2 indicates that majority of the participants witnessed any time they have any opportunity. In addition, the findings indicate that a larger group indicated that they indicated that they witnessed only when they held Evangelistic campaigns or crusades. This clearly shows misunderstanding of witnessing by other church members. They see witnessing as confined to a particular time and place (Tshuma, 2023) They seem to see witnessing as an event not a process. According to Acts 8:4 “Now those who were scattered (by persecution of Christians and the death of Stephen) went about preaching the word.” Paul would approach people where they were to witness to them. He met the Jews in the synagogue and the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers at the Areopagus Hall. He testified about Christ to the Jews in their synagogues (Acts 13:42; 17:2; 18:4), as a prisoner to his fellows (Acts 16:25-34, 24:22-27) in the Areopagus to the Greek philosophers (Acts 17:22-33), and in the ship that sailed to Rome Paul could comfort, counsel, exhort and heal the sick (Acts 28:8). At his final imprisonment in Rome Paul rented an apartment in which for two years he taught those who came to him (Acts 28:30). There are times Paul would conduct formal Bible studies from house to house and in public places (Acts 13:44; 20:20). Aquilla and Pricilla arranged Bible studies with Apollos when they noticed that he did not have a complete gospel. E Myers Harrison and Walter L. Wilson (1952) comment that it was the supreme concern of every believer, every day in the year, in every place, in the church, on the street, in the marketplace, in people’s homes Christian witnesses reached out to unbelievers by instruction, preaching, letter writing and personal contact.

The study also solicited information on reasons for lack of involvement by church members in witnessing. Their responses are shown in table 7.

Reason for Lack of Involvement by Church Members

The study also solicited information on reasons for lack of involvement by church members in witnessing. Their responses are shown in table 7.

Table 7: Participant’s reasons for lack of involvement by church members

S/N	The reason for lack of involvement in witnessing by church members	Total rating	Rank
1	No knowledge on starting to witness	454	3
2	Embarrassment resulting from failure to witness	407	6
3	People are too busy with their work, no time for witnessing	544	2
4	No hands on training and exposure on witnessing	428	5
5	Not aware of the divine obligation to do witnessing	431	4
6	Assuming others will do it	553	1

The findings in the table 7 show that majority were not involved in witnessing because they assumed others (witnessing team) will do it. There was a lot responses at this question. One frequent response on this question was that the term “*witnessing team*” made church members assume that there is a special group designed for such work. This was lamented by some participants when they said:

The use of the term witnessing team has made people to associate witnessing with a certain group of people.

Another reason for members not witnessing is lack of understanding of what witnessing constitutes. Church members do not understand the context to which they are called to witness, the role of witnessing in the church, if witnessing is an event or a process and many other things that are not understood pertaining witnessing. Some respondents also said that due to their personalities it would be difficult for them to participate in witnessing due to being shy and other reasons. A good number of participants, especially the elders felt the church programs were too packed so much that there was no time for witnessing. In line with this view, one church elder during focus group discussion lamented:

I do not do witnessing because of too many church programs and will be tired to do witnessing (FGD 6).

The Christian witnesses in the early church used to reach out to people in their locations. They would not wait for people to come to its meeting places. Paul could get to the homes of people to study the Bible with them (Acts 20:20). For witnessing to take place, it does not depend on whether someone is at work or not interested people will always find time to witness, as this does not interrupt their work schedules and those being witnessed to. Therefore, the church program cannot affect one’s witnessing initiative. This study views such submissions as just excuses of avoiding witnessing.

Another participant pointed out that:

Some people do not believe they can do it, they lack confidence and they are afraid (Participant, 118).

Another participant declared that:

Witnessing is taken as an event that only comes during Evangelistic efforts hence it becomes a necessity (Participant, 43).

An interesting response came from one of the youths, who lamented that:

Youths do not do witnessing because witnessing teams are mostly made up of elderly people and youths find it difficult to fit in (Participant, 43).

Generally, the study also revealed that most church members view witnessing as a program and done at a particular time. From this, most church members do witnessing as an activity planned by the church and do not do it outside planned church programs. Interestingly, from the questionnaire some participants indicated that they were not involved in witnessing because the church had a special group called witnessing team, which was solely responsible for the witnessing exercise.

Motivating Church Members to do Witnessing

The questionnaire required the participants to indicate what the church leadership can do to people to be involved in witnessing. The findings are shown in the Table 8.

Table 8 shows what the church leadership can do to people to witness.

S/N	What can the church leadership do to people for witnessing?	Total rating	Rank
1	Conduct hands-on trainings on witnessing	597	2
2	Promote witnessing more	600	3

3	Teach and explain the role of witnessing by each church member	639	1
4	Provide adequate witnessing templates	550	4
5	More localised witnessing manuals to be written	542	5

Table 8 reveals that most participants said church leaders should train church members on witnessing. One focus group discussion pointed out that:

Church leadership should do hands-on trainings. It should teach members what witnessing is and what one should do (FGD 2).

One participant said that

The church leadership should provide literature for the members so that they will be fully equipped. Some people do not participate in witnessing because they fear to be asked questions that they will fail to answer (Participant, 172).

Otherwise, some respondents felt the church was doing well in equipping them for witnessing and it was the onus of the church members to act. Some felt that the trainings should be done regularly so that it sticks to the mind and to enlighten members about new issues.

In the FGD schedule, the participants were asked to respond to the question whether the witnessing resources were adequate. On witnessing resources, participants indicated that the greatest challenge was the shortage of vernacular material for witnessing especially for rural areas. In urban areas, the witnessing materials were adequate especially in soft copy form. In addition, respondents in one focus group thought it was better to have the material in summary form so that people read the materials quickly.

Self- Rating on Devotional Life

The participants were asked to rate their devotional life. Devotional life is a good indicator of their relationship with God. In addition, devotional life is thought to be positively correlated to witnessing. The self -rating of devotional life with God shown in Figure 3 below.

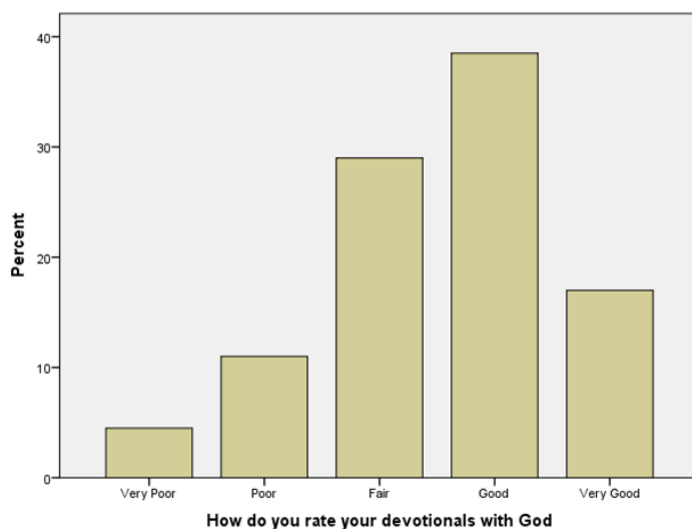


Figure 3: Shows how the participants rated their devotional life

From figure 3, most participants revealed that their devotion was good although this was not consistent with their witnessing patterns. It is expected that when one is having a consistent devotional life witnessing becomes part of their nature; such members no longer need to be reminded about witnessing. When the

devotional life of church members is good, they are expected to be actively involved in witnessing as exhibited by believers during Bible times. A careful examination of events involving the demon possessed man (Mark 5:1-20) the blind man who was healed by Jesus (John 9:1-38) and the woman of Samaria (John 4) show that witnessing is a natural result of the salvation experience and an encounter with Jesus. A saved person will naturally witness through their words and deeds. Hildreth and McKinion (2020) seem to call this “life-style evangelism” which according to them means “developing a life-style that enables gospel conversations to flow naturally through all the relationships we have.” Although it appears that evangelism is a natural overflow of Christian life, Donald S. Whitney asserts that Christian witnesses must intentionally discipline themselves to get into situations where evangelism can occur. They must not just wait for witnessing opportunities to happen. However it must be noted that while witnessing is a spontaneous process a Christian witness should be intentional in reaching out to people within their reach and sharing Christ with them. Probably these respondent who seem not involved in witnessing are not intentional in seeking witnessing opportunities or it may well be that they do not realise that sometimes witnessing occurs in informal settings.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to find out the perceptions of church members on witnessing, largely their understanding of this concept and the participation of members. While the study confirms that, the membership have a good appreciation of witnessing as a concept and that all church members should participate, the study noted that there is no transference of this knowledge to practicality. Witnessing is largely a preserve of few church members referred to as witnessing teams in many churches. Further to this witnessing is perceived as a church initiated and run programme. Church members have not yet perceived witnessing as an individual initiative to be planned and executed by an individual outside set church times. A large number of church members are waiting to be trained to be witnesses. This shows that they fail to comprehend witnessing as sharing one’s encounter with Jesus needing no bible verses or certain skills of doing it just like the woman at the well (John 4 v 28) and Legion (Mark 5v20). After their encounters with Jesus they went to their communities and witnessed what Jesus had done to them. The study found out that the church has not yet reached this stage of understanding witnessing in its proper light.

On the witnessing methods, it was observed that the methods that drew more people or visitors to church organized evangelistic campaigns are seen as the most effective witnessing methods. This perception further entrenches the fact that there is a misconception of witnessing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Bible is very clear on the mandate of the church, to go and make disciples (Matthew 28 v20) as they spread the everlasting gospel to all nations enshrined in the three angels’ message found in Revelation 14 v 6-12. It is therefore very prudent that the church treats the subject of witnessing with all diligence so that its members are not found wanting in this regard. It is on this backdrop that the study makes the following recommendations:

- Church leadership at all levels should clarify the concept of witnessing to church members; it seems it is taken for granted that members have a clear understanding of what witnessing entails. The study identified some gaps in the understanding of this concept which need urgent attention.
- The church leadership should make deliberate and intentional efforts in coming up with witnessing templates, that will aid understanding of the concept in addition to application.
- Church member to be encouraged and trained to use both online and face to face methods of witnessing.
- The church leadership should emphasise the differences between witnessing and inviting people to evangelistic campaigns. Witnessing should be explained as an individual initiative done by an individual outside church times.

- Church members are to be encouraged and motivated as individuals to take witnessing as a God given task to be done by all church members without exception.
- Witnessing should be viewed as an activity that can be done without disturbing the normal of life.
- Given the busy schedule of people, the witnesses need to find ways of reaching to their prospects without disturbing their programs. This was the case with the Ethiopian Eunuch to whom Phillip witnesses without interrupting the journey. It should be noted that one can witness informally through conversations
- Although it appears that evangelism is a natural overflow of Christian life, Christian witnesses should intentionally discipline themselves to get into situations where evangelism can occur. They must not just wait for witnessing opportunities to happen. However it must be noted that while witnessing is a spontaneous process a Christian witness should be intentional in reaching out to people within their reach and sharing Christ with them.
- The church should not be done in a way that everything revolves around its programs. Church members must not limit witnessing to the church programs. They witness during the six days of the week outside church as they live out their Christian lives in the community where ever they are. It could be at work as they transect business, at school, in the market place, in the street and as they journey. Witnessing should be seen as a process that takes place everywhere all the time, not an event that is confined to certain places and times.
- Witnesses should live out their Christian lives in a way that unbelievers will be led to ask them to verbalise their faith or “to give an answer about the hope that is in them (2 Peter 3:15)”
- Witnesses should develop skills of presenting the gospel in a *conversational manner*. It is natural for your faith to come out in how you talk, no matter what you are talking about. Lifestyle evangelism means developing a life-style that enables gospel conversations to flow naturally through all the relationships and interactions we have with people. Christ can be shared both by words and deeds.
- The gospel presentations must not be limited to formal presentations.

Prospects can be reached with the gospel while they are engaged in their daily businesses. Christian witnessing can be conducted outside church-centered programs. Much of the work must be done during the 6 days of the week in the community.

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