

The Understanding of the Importance of Participating in the Holy Communion Among Baptized Members of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church within Central Kenya Conference

Samwel Robinson Moegi

Adventist University of Africa, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the understanding regarding the importance of participating in Holy Communion among baptized members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church within the Central Kenya Conference. Holy Communion, a significant religious practice involving the partaking of bread and wine following the ordinance of foot washing, commemorates Jesus Christ's sacrifice and serves as a moment of spiritual unity. Despite its significance, participation rates are notably low, as reflected in the 2017-2018 Global Church Member Survey. This research aimed to explore the underlying reasons for this trend and develop strategies to enhance participation. Employing a quantitative research design, the study surveyed members from selected churches including Karura, Lovington, and Nairobi Central. Findings revealed that while members acknowledge the importance of Holy Communion, barriers such as feelings of unworthiness, discomfort with foot washing, and perceived insignificance of the service hinder full engagement. The study recommends comprehensive educational strategies to emphasize the ritual's theological significance, improved communication and engagement within the church community, and proactive roles for church leadership in addressing both spiritual and practical concerns. Future research should explore the long-term effects of these strategies and investigate the experiences of different demographic groups to tailor interventions accordingly. This study highlights the need for targeted interventions to bridge the gap between theological teachings and personal experiences, fostering a deeper spiritual connection and enhancing participation in Holy Communion.

Keywords: Holy Communion, Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Central Kenya Conference, Spiritual Unity, Foot Washing, Religious Practice, Participation Barriers, Theological Significance, Church Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper, is a significant religious practice within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, where believers partake in bread and wine after the ordinance of foot washing. This sacred observance commemorates Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross and serves as a moment of spiritual unity and nourishment for participants. Despite its profound significance, participation in Holy Communion was notably low among Seventh-day Adventist members, as evidenced by surveys like the 2017-2018 Global Church Member Survey. This survey revealed that only about 49% of respondents globally participated in Holy Communion at least once a quarter, leaving a substantial portion of members not engaging in this important ritual regularly. This trend was particularly concerning in the East Central Africa Division, where only 51% of respondents reported quarterly participation, indicating a significant gap that warranted further investigation and intervention.

The low participation rate in Holy Communion posed a critical challenge for the spiritual life and discipleship within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, especially in the Central Kenya Conference. The profound spiritual experience and the commandment of Christ to partake in Holy Communion highlighted its importance as a unifying act of worship, reflection, and remembrance of Christ's sacrifice. However, the noticeable decline in participation could have adverse consequences on the spiritual well-being of church members, potentially indicating a disconnect from essential aspects of faith practice and community engagement. This issue was not isolated but reflected broader concerns that needed addressing to enhance the spiritual vitality and communal participation within the church.

Given the importance of Holy Communion in the spiritual life of Seventh-day Adventist members, this study aimed to investigate the underlying reasons for low participation rates in the Holy Communion services within selected churches of the Central Kenya Conference. By focusing on specific congregations such as Karura, Lovington, and Nairobi Central, the study sought to identify the barriers and challenges that hindered members' participation. Through a comprehensive analysis, the study aimed to develop effective strategies and interventions to mitigate these challenges, thereby enhancing participation rates and building a deeper spiritual connection among church members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theological Foundations of Holy Communion

The theological foundations of Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper, are deeply rooted in the Old Testament practice of Passover. The Passover commemorated the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, with the sacrificial lamb symbolizing the future sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Exodus 13; White, 1890). Ellen G. White (1890) asserts that the Passover was both commemorative and typical, pointing back to the deliverance from Egypt and forward to Christ's sacrifice, which frees humanity from the bondage of sin. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ reinterprets the Passover during the Last Supper, where He identifies the bread and wine with His body and blood (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-23). This act establishes the theological basis for Holy Communion, emphasizing the need for believers to partake in Christ's sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins and spiritual nourishment (John 6:53-54).

Historical Context of Holy Communion in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

The observance of Holy Communion in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church is influenced by its theological understanding of the Holy Communion and its historical roots. The SDA Church views Holy Communion as a continuation of the Passover's symbolism, integrating it into their worship practices. Ellen G. White (1890) highlights that Christ's institution of the Holy Communion was intended to replace the Passover, commemorating His death and the great deliverance it achieved. This understanding is reflected in the SDA Church's practice, where the Lord's Supper is observed as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice, aligning with Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. The historical adoption of Holy Communion by the SDA Church underscores its commitment to the biblical foundations laid out by both Old and New Testament scriptures.

Theological Foundations in the New Testament Writings

The New Testament writings provide a robust theological framework for Holy Communion, emphasizing its significance in the early Christian community. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' actions during the Last Supper establish the ritual of breaking bread and sharing wine as a perpetual reminder of His sacrifice (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-23). The apostle Paul further elaborates on this in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, where he instructs the Corinthian church on the proper observance of the Lord's Supper, emphasizing its role in proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes again (1 Corinthians 11:26). This theological foundation is rooted in the belief that believers participate in the body and blood of Christ through Holy Communion, generating a deep spiritual connection with Him and with one another (Acts 2:42).

Ellen G. White's Influence

Ellen G. White's writings have significantly shaped the Seventh-day Adventist understanding and practice of Holy Communion. White (1890) posits that the Passover and Holy Communion are interconnected, with the latter serving as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice and a symbol of the believer's ongoing spiritual nourishment. She emphasizes the importance of partaking in Holy Communion with a heart of contrition and sincerity, free from the leaven of sin, as Paul advises in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8. White's interpretation aligns with the broader Christian theology that sees Holy Communion as both a remembrance of Christ's sacrifice and an anticipation of His second coming. This theological perspective has profoundly influenced the historical and contemporary

practice of Holy Communion in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, reinforcing its significance as a central act of worship and a means of grace.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to explore relationships between numerically measured variables using statistical techniques. Quantitative research is suitable for testing existing theories and examining relationships among factors in a statistical context (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Given the study's aim to establish the importance of participation in Holy Communion and potential strategies for increasing engagement, a quantitative approach allowed for precise measurement and analysis. The research strategy employed was a survey method, enabling the collection of standardized data from a larger sample economically and efficiently through questionnaires as supported by Trochim, Donnelly, and Arora (2015). This approach is beneficial for descriptive and explanatory studies where relationships between variables are analyzed to draw generalizable conclusions about the target population.

Population and Sampling

The study targeted baptized members of selected churches within the Central Kenya Conference of the East Kenya Union Conference, specifically Karura, Lovington, and Nairobi Central. Given the impracticality of surveying the entire population due to time and budget constraints, a representative sample of 300 church members was determined. Simple random sampling was chosen to ensure each member of the target population had an equal chance of selection, enhancing the study's internal and external validity (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). This method minimizes biases and ensures a representative subset of the population, facilitating reliable and generalizable findings. The questionnaires were distributed in person to maintain a high response rate and data accuracy.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection for this study was conducted using structured questionnaires with closed-ended questions, suitable for the descriptive and explanatory nature of the research. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: demographic characteristics, reasons for low participation in Holy Communion, and tools for increasing participation, such as education, mentorship, accountability, and fellowship. Some items were adapted from validated instruments used in previous studies, while others were developed based on literature reviews (DeVaus, 2014). The use of a five-point Likert scale ensured that responses could be quantitatively analyzed to assess attitudes and perceptions. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to, ensuring participants' voluntary and secure participation.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data analysis involved several interrelated procedures to convert raw data into meaningful information. Initially, data preparation included pre-analysis screening to check for missing data, outliers, and normality. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated to summarize the data's basic features (Field, 2018). Data collected through physical questionnaire were transferred to Excel for cleaning and statistical analysis. Results were presented in a table, allowing for clear interpretation and generalization of findings to the broader population.

FINDINGS

By examining specific statements related to understanding of the importance of participation in Holy Communion through a Forced Choice Likert Scale (where 1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree and 4 = Strongly Agree), it allowed for a keen examination of the barriers, challenges, and perceptions surrounding participation in Holy Communion, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the spiritual dynamics within religious communities. The table below presents the findings obtained.

Table 1: Statements about Participation in Holy Communion

	Statements about Participation in Holy Communion	1	2	3	4	Total	Weighted Means	Std. Dev. (σ)	
1	I feel unworthy to participate in the Lord's Supper.	48	23	12	4	87	1.68	1.28	
2	Feeling uncomfortable about foot washing	61	20	4	1	86	1.36	1.21	
3	I find it difficult to choose a partner with whom to wash feet.	50	21	9	7	87	1.69	1.2	
4	Sometimes unresolved differences with a person in the church makes me skip the Holy Communion service.	48	25	10	4	87	1.66	1.25	
5	Holy Communion is not a significant worship experience	69	12	2	1	84	1.23	1.31	
6	The Holy Communion service is too long	34	35	9	8	86	1.90	1.33	
7	I choose to be away during Holy Communion Sabbaths.	62	22	1	2	87	1.34	1.19	
8	I find the ordinance of foot washing uncomfortable	55	26	2	2	85	1.42	1.22	
9	Sometime I feel unworthy to participate the Holy communion	31	21	23	9	84	2.12	1.41	
10	Foot washing is not a mini baptism	23	20	14	27	84	2.54	1.48	
11	Lord's Supper does not bring forgiveness	48	23	8	5	84	1.64	1.28	
12	I do not like cold water for foot washing	41	29	11	5	86	1.77	1.34	
13	I do not like the way the Bread is prepared	56	28	0	1	85	1.36	1.21	
14	I do not like the way the wine is prepared	60	25	0	1	86	1.33	1.2	
15	It is time for recreation	37	19	12	14	82	2.04	1.37	
	Composite Mean	2							

While there was a recognition of the importance of Holy Communion, various barriers and challenges significantly influence participation rates. For instance, the statement "I feel unworthy to participate in the Lord's Supper" had a weighted mean of 1.68, indicating a prevalent sense of unworthiness among many respondents, which could deter participation despite recognizing its importance. Similarly, discomfort related to the ordinance of foot washing, reflected in the statement "Feeling uncomfortable about foot washing" with a weighted mean of 1.36, suggests that the physical aspects of the ritual contribute to participation reluctance. These findings highlight that while members may value the ritual, practical and emotional barriers must be addressed to enhance engagement.

Additionally, the perception that "Holy Communion is not a significant worship experience," which yielded a weighted mean of 1.23, underscores a critical area of concern where the ritual's spiritual significance might not

be fully appreciated by some members. This perception may contribute to the decision of some members to be absent during Holy Communion Sabbaths, as indicated by the weighted mean of 1.34 for the statement "I choose to be away during Holy Communion Sabbaths." These responses point to a need for better education and mentorship to emphasize the spiritual benefits and importance of Holy Communion, potentially transforming it from a ritual obligation to a meaningful worship experience.

Moreover, the data shows mixed feelings about the duration and specific practices involved in Holy Communion. The statement "The Holy Communion service is too long" had a weighted mean of 1.90, suggesting that while some members might find the length of the service burdensome, others are less concerned. The statement "Foot washing is not a mini baptism," with a higher weighted mean of 2.54, illustrates diverse opinions about the symbolism and significance of foot washing within the communion service. These mixed feelings highlight the need for clearer communication about the ritual's elements and their spiritual symbolism, ensuring that all members understand and appreciate each component's importance.

Overall, the composite mean of 2 suggests a moderate overall perception of Holy Communion's importance among respondents, balancing both positive and negative sentiments. This indicates that while there is an underlying recognition of its significance, various challenges and misconceptions need to be addressed. Enhancing participation in Holy Communion requires a multifaceted approach that includes addressing feelings of unworthiness, discomfort, and lack of understanding about the ritual's significance. By promoting inclusivity and deeper spiritual engagement, church leaders can help build a more positive and participatory attitude towards Holy Communion within the Seventh-Day Adventist Church community in Central Kenya.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings

The findings from this study reveal that while baptized members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church within the Central Kenya Conference recognize the importance of participating in Holy Communion, several barriers and challenges hinder their full engagement. These barriers include feelings of unworthiness, discomfort with the physical aspects of the ritual such as foot washing, and a perceived lack of significance of the Holy Communion service itself. These issues indicate a gap between the theological understanding of Holy Communion and the personal experiences and perceptions of the church members. This gap suggests a need for more focused spiritual education and pastoral care to help members internalize the importance of Holy Communion, addressing both their emotional and practical concerns.

Implications for Church Practices

To address the identified barriers and enhance participation in Holy Communion, the church needs to implement several strategic practices. First, increasing educational efforts about the theological significance and spiritual benefits of Holy Communion can help shift members' perceptions from seeing it as a ritual obligation to recognizing it as a meaningful worship experience. This can be achieved through sermons, Bible study sessions, and personal testimonies that highlight the transformative power of Holy Communion. Additionally, providing clear and compassionate pastoral guidance can help alleviate feelings of unworthiness and discomfort, ensuring that members understand that Holy Communion is a means of grace and spiritual renewal (White, 1946).

Revisiting the practical aspects of the Holy Communion service, such as the foot washing ritual, can make the experience more inclusive and less intimidating. For instance, offering alternative ways to participate in foot washing or addressing logistical concerns such as water temperature can reduce physical discomfort and anxiety. Creating a supportive and welcoming environment during Holy Communion services can also harness a sense of community and belonging, encouraging more members to participate fully. By addressing both the spiritual and practical aspects of Holy Communion, the church can enhance its members' understanding and participation, ultimately strengthening their spiritual lives and communal bonds (Maxwell, 2011).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study revealed several key insights into the understanding and participation in Holy Communion among baptized members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church within the Central Kenya Conference. It was found that while members acknowledge the importance of Holy Communion, various barriers such as feelings of unworthiness, discomfort with the foot washing ritual, and perceived insignificance of the service hinder their participation. These findings highlight a disconnect between the theological teachings of the church and the personal experiences of its members, suggesting a need for targeted interventions to bridge this gap.

Educational Strategies

To address these barriers, the church should implement comprehensive educational strategies that emphasize the theological and spiritual significance of Holy Communion. This can be achieved through regular sermons, interactive Bible study sessions, and workshops that provide in-depth understanding and personal reflections on the meaning of Holy Communion. Utilizing testimonies and experiences from church members who have found spiritual renewal through participating in Holy Communion can also be a powerful tool in shifting perceptions and encouraging wider participation.

Enhancing Communication and Engagement

Improving communication and engagement within the church community is crucial to addressing the identified barriers. The church should create open forums for discussion where members can express their concerns and receive empathetic responses. Additionally, using various communication channels such as newsletters, social media, and church meetings to disseminate information and encourage dialogue can develop a more inclusive and supportive environment. Ensuring that all members feel heard and valued will promote a greater sense of belonging and willingness to participate in Holy Communion.

Role of Church Leadership

Church leadership plays a pivotal role in enhancing participation in Holy Communion. Leaders should model the importance of the ritual through their own participation and by providing clear, compassionate guidance to the congregation. They should also focus on pastoral care, offering counseling and support to members struggling with feelings of unworthiness or discomfort. By addressing both the spiritual and practical aspects of Holy Communion, church leaders can create an environment where all members feel prepared and encouraged to participate fully.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should explore the long-term effects of the implemented educational and engagement strategies on participation in Holy Communion. It would be beneficial to conduct longitudinal studies that track changes in attitudes and participation rates over time. Additionally, investigating the experiences of different demographic groups within the church, such as youth, elderly, and new converts, can provide deeper insights into specific challenges and tailor interventions accordingly. Expanding research to include comparisons with other regions or denominations can also offer valuable perspectives and best practices for enhancing participation in Holy Communion.

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