

A Literature Review on Leadership and Cultural Evolution of Adventism in East Africa Region

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ABSTRACT

This literature review synthesizes scholarly work on leadership evolution and cultural adaptation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa, a region now constituting 44% of the global denominational membership. Employing a conceptual framework grounded in transformational leadership, contextual theology, and feminist ecclesiology, the review critically analyzes the transition for missionary-led governance to indigenous leadership models. It examines how the integration of local customs, language, and youth engagement has been pivotal to the church's growth, while also creating tensions with doctrinal purity. A central finding is the persistent limitation of women's leadership roles due to patriarchal norms and theological conservatism, despite advocacy and training initiatives. While these adaptive strategies have propelled growth, they also create tension with doctrine and underscore a significant gap between grassroots empowerment and formal policy. The review identifies literature limitations, including geographic bias and lack of longitudinal data. It concludes that the church's future sustainability in East Africa hinges on developing more inclusive, contextually sensitive models that actively promote gender equity and deeper cultural integration, areas which also present key directions for future research.

Key words: Seventh-day Adventists, Leadership Evolution, Cultural Adaptation, Women's leadership, Global Denominational Membership.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid spread and cultural impact of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa has attracted much scholarly inquiry. Within a century the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa has significantly expanded to represent 44% of the global denominational membership. This growth reflects the interplay between faith, culture, and leadership in the context of Africa (Miller, 2024; Andrews University & Gumbo, 2008). Factors such as leadership styles, increased influence of local leaders, and the contribution of women in leadership roles have influenced this rapid growth, not neglecting the cultural adaptation that combines local customs, language, and the engagement of the youth (Molobi & Mzondi, 2022). This historical development, amidst challenges, highlights the church's contribution in painting religious identity and community development in the East African region (Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021; Adogame & Spickard, 2010).

Despite this monumental expansion, the Seventh-day Adventist Church encounters leadership inclusivity and cultural contextualization challenges. There is a limited inclusion of women in high ranks of leadership, perhaps due to patriarchal norms and theological debates (Mwangi et al., 2023; Lagat, 2016; Granquist, 2020). There are no official prohibitions, but cultural resistance or practical hindrances continue to surface (Kabugi, 2023; Frost, 2024), building antagonism between traditional interpretations and egalitarian theologies (Kariuki, 2024; Gatumu, 2019). The church's engagement with local cultures is complex, since syncretism conflicts with biblical doctrines (Andrews University & Gumbo, 2008; Agadjanian, 2025). These gaps cause ill representation, members alienation, and challenge to mission growth (Mwandayi, 2023; Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020).

This literature review adopts a conceptual model to analyze the relationships of leadership evolution, cultural adaptation, and gender dynamics in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is anchored in transformational leadership, contextual theology, and feminist ecclesiology theories (Phiri & Chitando, 2023; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Nwoko & Igbokwe, 2023). It purposes to critically scrutinize the unfolding of leadership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa, highlighting changes in leadership styles, the influence of local leaders, and the women's role. The cultural adaptation strategies and historical progress are also explored, identifying major milestones, challenges, and growth patterns. The review fills the existing knowledge gaps and informs strategies for inclusive and culturally relevant church leadership by addressing these objectives (Sanou, 2024; Kabugi, 2023; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021). It applies a qualitative synthesis of scholarly literature, with a focus on peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and case studies relevant to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa. Studies addressing leadership, gender, cultural adaptation, and historical development within the church are prioritized as inclusion criteria. The organization and interpretation of findings are underpinned by analytical models from missiology, gender literature, and leadership theory, structured to reflect the themes of leadership evolution, cultural integration, and historical context (Famorot, 2023; Wakahiu & Keller, 2011; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

This literature review synthesizes literature on the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa, examining leadership evolution and underscoring a shift towards local styles and the complexity of women's roles. It also analyzes the church's cultural adaptation by integrating local customs and language and youth engagement. The church's historical development reflects milestones, growth patterns, and challenges. The findings cast light on the dynamic intertwining of faith, culture, and leadership, providing a base for understanding the church's unique progress in the region and for informing future ecclesiastical strategies and research.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this review are to evaluate existing knowledge on leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa, benchmark the current approaches to cultural adaptation, identify and synthesize research findings on women's role in church leadership, compare milestones, challenges, and growth patterns documented in the development of the church, and deconstruct the influence of local leadership styles and youth engagement on the church's growth and sustainability.

Methodology of Literature Selection

Systematic searches were conducted across PubMed and Google Scholar databases using terms related to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa, including "leadership evolution," "changes in leadership styles," "influence of local leaders," "role of women in leadership," "cultural adaptation," and "challenges and growth patterns." The criteria for inclusion/exclusion were papers (journals, articles, books, dissertations, and case studies) from the years 1900 to 2025. Citation chaining (backward and forward) was conducted. 109 papers were relevant, out of which 50 were found to be highly relevant.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This comprehensive literature review will encompass the descriptive summary of the studies, critical analysis and synthesis, thematic review of literature, chronological review of literature, agreement and divergence across studies, theoretical and practical implications, limitations of the literature, gaps and future research directions, and overall synthesis and conclusion.

Descriptive Summary of the Studies

This section summarizes the studies on the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa, focusing on leadership evolution, women's role in leadership, cultural adaptation strategies, historical development, and the influence of local leaders. The reviewed literature encompasses a vast array of qualitative and mixed-methods research, with a primary focus on East African regions such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, with various

comparative insights from other regions. This synthesis has the relevancy for the understanding of how local leaders and cultural factors shape the church's evolution and the role of gender and youth engagement compounds with ecclesiastical development.

Leadership evolution

The evolution of leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been marked by significant organizational and cultural shifts, reflecting broader changes in church governance and contextual adaptation. Scholars concur that in East Africa leadership has evolved under the influence of sociocultural, political, and theological factors, with a steady but uneven shift towards more inclusive leadership frameworks (Sanou, 2024; Lagat, 2016; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012). While studies highlighted persistent patriarchal leadership systems that maintain male dominance despite some empowerment initiatives (Kabugi, 2023; Kariuki, 2024; Kwaramba & Dreyer, 2019), others underscore the impact of leadership training and transformational leadership models in enhancing change and capacity building among women leaders (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2021; Ngunjiri, 2006). This signals that there are significant changes of attitudes among the leaders towards more inclusivity in the church's leadership.

Thorough examination of literature reveals both strengths and weaknesses in different respects across various scholars on this matter. On one hand there are insightful data provided by some studies on leadership styles transformation within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, underscoring the shift from missionary dominance to local leadership models, incorporating indigenous cultural elements (Sanou, 2023; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021). The amalgamation of social, cultural, and political factors allows a deep understanding of leadership dynamics in East Africa (Sanou, 2024). On the other hand, the prevalence of qualitative descriptive research designs limits the ability of generalization of findings across the territory. Various studies don't have longitudinal data to systematically track the evolution of leadership over time (Kabugi, 2023). Additionally, there is inadequate empirical analysis of how leadership changes influence church growth and sustainability quantitatively (Sanou, 2024).

The subject of leadership evolution was treated by scholars with differing standpoints, causing both convergent and divergent conclusions. Most studies agree that leadership in East African churches has emerged from foreign missionary control to local leadership with adapted leadership styles in response to cultural contexts (Sanou, 2024; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021). They further concur that leadership development programs, particularly for women, have enhanced shifts toward transformational and servant leadership frameworks (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012; Ngunjiri, 2006). However, there are those that diverge regarding the extent of leadership change; some underscore significant development in leadership inclusivity (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011), others observe patriarchal structures that hinder genuine evolution (Phaliso, 2012; Agadjanian, 2024). These differences are possibly due to variations in denominational traditions, resistance levels to change, and the scope of leadership programs. Studies that focus on grassroots leadership show more development than organizational church assessment.

Women's Roles in Church Leadership

The participation of women in leadership roles within the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a complex issue influenced by historical, cultural, and theological factors. Studies record outstanding barriers to women's full participation in church leadership, including lack of ordination, cultural patriarchy, and institutional resistance (Kabugi, 2023; Lagat, 2026; Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020). While a considerable number of studies reported positive trends in women's empowerment through training, empowerment, advocacy, and theological reinterpretation supporting gender equality (Andrews University & Simankane, 2010; Ngunjiri & Christo-Baker, 2012; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012), 24% of the reviewed studies noted the complex negotiation women undertake within the patriarchal and cultural frameworks to gain leadership legitimacy (Frost, 2022; Mhando et al., 2018; Mapuranga, 2013). For instance, in Botswana contexts, empirical studies note positive attitudes towards women's empowerment (Andrews University & Simankane, 2010). Though this may be associated with the dominance of women in church membership in Botswana, who assume almost all leadership roles in the church since men are limited in number.

Research is consistent in underscoring the underrepresentation, challenges, and gradual empowerment of women in church leadership roles. Patriarchal structures, cultural norms, and theological debates emerge as inhibitors of women's ordination and leadership. Initiatives to empower women and leadership training programs are also documented (Agadjanian, 2024; Kabugi, 2023; Ngunjiri & Christo-Baker, 2012; Chitando, 2023; Frost, 2024; Frost, 2022; Aringo & Njenga, 2022; Dassah & Nonterah, 2025; De Jager et al., 2023; Famorot, 2023b; Graves, 2024; Kebede, 2024; Masengwe & Dube, 2024; Mujinga, 2020; Munamati, 2023; Muriithi, 2000; Sherley Krei, 2024). All these findings indicate an evolving yet contested landscape with arguments for inclusivity policies, theological interpretation, and leadership development.

Generally, there is a broad understanding that women are underrepresented in formal church leadership roles across denominations, as highlighted before; however, there are divergent perspectives, in which some denominations have greater acceptance and empowerment of women in church leadership roles, with Pentecostal churches leading in allowing women to assume prominent leadership (Mhando et al., 2018; Frost, 2024; Mapuranga, 2013). In contrast, some studies highlight the persistent resistance due to cultural patriarchy and theological interpretations opposing women's leadership (Lagat, 2016; Kariuki, 2024; Agadjanian, 2024). These differences stem from denominational theology, cultural contexts, and levels and organizational conservatism. While Pentecostal and other African-initiated churches offer more leadership opportunities for women, mainstream churches maintain stricter policies.

In spite of these strengths, studies note a persistent divide between policy and practice, with many churches missing formal mechanisms for women's ordination or leadership inclusivity (Kabugi, 2023; Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020). Systemic marginalization is reflected in the exclusion of women theologians from key discussions (Lagat, 2016). Another weakness is that many studies are descriptive and lack critical engagement with intersectional aspects like race, class, and age (Ngunjiri & Christo-Baker, 2012).

Cultural Adaptation Strategies

The Seventh-day Adventist Church employs varied cultural adaptation strategies to deal with diversity and integration within its congregations. Almost 50% of the studies that were examined highlighted the importance of amalgamating local customs, languages, and youth engagement as critical for church growth and leadership acceptance (Sanou, 2024; Andrews University & Gambo, 2008; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021). Challenges caused by syncretism and traditional beliefs that conflict with biblical doctrines were emphasized by 30% of the literature reviewed, signaling a need for critical contextualization (Andrews University & Gambo, 2023; Baloyi & Phumzile, 2023; Agadjanian, 2024). Other studies noted the intercultural leadership challenges encountered by women, including conflicting gender norms and effects of globalization (Krei, 2024; Granquist, 2020).

Despite of various adaptation strategies, many studies focus narrowly on specific people groups, such as the Maasai or Luo, which may not represent the vast East African contexts (Andrews University & Gambo, 2023; Massoi, 2018). Many studies also tend to highlight challenges over adaptation strategies, thus skewing the narrative in the direction of conflict rather than amalgamation (Andrews University, 2023).

Cultural adaptation encompasses negotiating indigenous customs, addressing syncretism, and biblical doctrine contextualization in light of African traditions. Endeavors pertain to language adaptation, critical engagement with traditional beliefs, and incorporating local practices into worship and governance, ensuring relevance and resonance with congregants (Sanou, 2024; Andrews University & Gambo, 2023; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021; Massoi, 2018; Adogame & Spickard, 2010;). The tension is noted by literature between maintaining doctrinal purity and enhancing cultural inclusivity, underscoring the persistent contextualization processes.

Basically, studies converge on the point that churches integrate local customs, languages, and engagement of youth into their mission strategies to foster membership growth and remain relevant (Sanou, 2024; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021; Andrews University & Gambo, 2023). However, the divergence is on how effectively these adaptations resolve the underlying tensions, particularly syncretism and the traditional beliefs versus biblical teachings saga (Andrews University & Gambo, 2023). It is observed that some churches struggle to fully and effectively engage the youth to strike the balance between traditional practices and doctrinal purity (Sanou,

2024; Andrews University & Gambo, 2023). Potentially, this divergence stems from variations of the degrees of contextual theology adaptation and local leadership effectiveness. Churches with more local leadership may easily and better resolve cultural tensions than those retaining foreign mission models.

Historical progression

The historical progression of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa, like other denominations, is marked by a series of strategic missionary activities and socio-cultural amalgamations that have considerably played a role in its growth and establishment in the region. Out of the 50 studies that were reviewed, 30 mapped major milestones such as gradual acceptance of women as leaders, key leadership crises, and church growth patterns influenced by indigenous and foreign missions (Sanou, 2024; Mujinga, 2020). While some scholars documented ongoing challenges, including gender exclusion, cultural distance, and theological debates over ordination (Lagat, 2016; Kariuki, 2024; Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020), others traced the evolution of women's leadership roles as a developmental process from marginalization to increasing visibility and influence (Ngunjiri & Christo-Baker, 2012; Chitando, 2023; Mapuranga, 2013). However, historical accounts overlook the contribution of women and local leaders, focusing the attention on lame missionary figures (Richter, 2022). Additionally, there is a limited critical examination of how colonial and post-colonial dynamics shaped leadership systems and cultural adaptation (Obare, 2021).

There is a noted consensus on vital milestones like shifting from predominantly missionary to indigenous leadership, growth in membership, and increasing conversations on women's roles over time (Sanou, 2024; Kebede, 2024; Richter, 2022). Challenges such as syncretism, patriarchal resistance, and socio-cultural barriers are consistently documented (Sanou, 2024; Andrews University & Gambo, 2023; Mwandayi, 2023).

However, some scholars offer more optimistic accounts of progress towards gender inclusivity and church leadership diversification (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012), while others document slow or uneven historical progress, with consistent exclusion of women in sensitive roles (Mujinga, 2020; Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020). These differences are founded on the denominational histories, geographic specificity, and focus on their organizational or grassroots developments. Studies with longitudinal data may capture more nuanced shifts than cross-sectional ones.

Influence of Local leadership

Shaped by cultural, theological, and structural dynamics, the influence of local leadership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa cannot be overlooked. Scholars have documented immensely. In this review, for instance, 56% of the literature dealt with the influence of local leadership in the progression of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Pivotal roles of local leaders in the contextualization of church governance, mediating cultural amalgamation, and shaping leadership styles were underscored by these studies (Sanou, 2024; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021; Kairu et al., 2020; Kwaramba & dreyer, 2019). Additionally, some studies focused on the emerging local female leaders who challenge traditional norms and expand leadership paradigms (Mhando et al., 2018; Ngunjiri, 2006; Dassah and Nonterah, 2025).

Research has documented the efforts of integrating local customs and language and addressing syncretism and cultural tensions, particularly in Kenya (Andrews University & Gambo, 2023). It was noted that the critical contextualization method empowers members to navigate traditional beliefs (Andrews University & Gambo). However, many studies narrow their focus on specific people groups such as the Luo or Maasai, which may not represent the entirety of East Africa (Massoi, 2018; Andrews University, 2023), as mentioned before in this review.

Scholars agree on the crucial role played by local leaders in terms of shaping governance, adapting leadership styles, and mediating cultural amalgamation, obviously serving as agents of change within churches (Sanou, 2024; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021). Effective cultural contextualization is linked to indigenous leadership (Sanou, 2024; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021). Divergence among scholars, however, is observed in the extent to which local leaders embrace gender equity and youth engagement; some promote patriarchal norms limiting women's leadership, while others advocate for inclusivity and empowerment (Kabugi, 2023; Kairu, 2020;

Mapuranga, 2013). Central to these divergences are the different local cultural norms, theological interpretations, leadership training levels, and denominational policies affecting local leaders' attitudes and actions.

Summary of Thematic Analysis

Theme	Appears In	Theme Description
Women's Leadership and Participation in Church	30/50	Research consistently highlights the underrepresentation, challenges, and gradual empowerment of women in church leadership roles. Studies reveal barriers such as patriarchal structures, cultural norms, and theological debates that inhibit women's ordination and leadership, while also documenting initiatives and training programs aimed at empowering women for ministry and leadership positions (Kabugi, 2023)(Lagat, 2016)("Development and Empowerment of Women for...", 2023)(Kinoti, 2019)(Ngunjiri & Christo-Baker,2012)(Chitando, 2023)(Frost, 2024)(Frost, 2024)(Frost, 2022)(Munamati,2023)(Mujinga, 2020)(Kwaramba & Dreyer, 2019)(Jager, 2023)(Graves, 2024)(Kebede, 2024)(Mwandayi, 2023)(Aringo & Njenga, 2022)(Gatumu, 2020)(Masengwe & Dube, 2024)(Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020)(Muriithi, 2000)(Nkomo & Nga'mbi, 2009)("Integrating Women into the Leadership of...", 2023)(Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012)(Krei, 2024)("Kepemimpinan Wanita Kristen: Pengaruh Da...", 2023)(Dassah & Nonterah, 2025)(Agadjanian, 2024). These findings show an evolving yet contested landscape with calls for inclusive policies, theological reinterpretation, and leadership development.
Leadership Evolution and Styles in East African Churches	28/50	Leadership in East African Adventist and related churches has evolved from colonial missionary models to indigenous leadership styles that reflect local cultural values. Leadership paradigms have shifted towards more inclusive,transformational, and servant leadership models, emphasizing communityengagement, empowerment, and sustainability(Sanou, 2024)(Masengwe &Magwidi, 2021)(Wakahiu & Keller, 2011)(Ngunjiri, 2006)(Wakahiu & Salvaterra,2012)(Hassan & Silong, 2008). The integration of local leadership has contributed to church growth and adaptability, although challenges remain in balancing traditional authority and progressive leadership approaches
Cultural Adaptation and Integration	25/50	The church's cultural adaptation includes negotiating indigenous customs, addressing syncretism, and contextualizing biblical teachings in light of African traditions. Efforts involve language adaptation, critical engagement with traditional beliefs, and incorporating local practices into worship and governance, ensuring relevance and resonance with congregants (Sanou,2024) ("An Adventist Missiological Response to T...", 2023) (Masengwe &Magwidi, 2021) (Massoi, 2018) (Parsitau & Mwaura, 2010). The literature underscore the tension between maintaining doctrinal purity and fostering cultural inclusivity, highlighting ongoing contextualization processes.
Historical progression	21/50	Studies trace the historical milestones of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and other denominations in East Africa, documenting

and Growth Patterns		missionary efforts, indigenization, expansion phases, and socio-political challenges (Sanou, 2024) (Richter, 2022) (Kebede, 2024) (Parsitau & Mwaura, 2010) (Ngunjiri, 2006) (Nkomo & Nga'mbi, 2009). This theme captures patterns of growth influenced by political changes, gender dynamics, and cultural shifts, providing achronological context for leadership and institutional developments.
Influence of Patriarchy and Gender Norms	22/50	Patriarchal theology and cultural gender norms are identified as key impediments to women's leadership, influencing church policies and attitudes. The literature discusses how masculine images of God and societal expectations reinforce male dominance in church leadership, marginalizing women despite their active participation (Kabugi, 2023) (Lagat, 2016) (Sorke, n.d.) (Kariuki, 2024) (KAIRU et al., n.d.) (Frost, 2024) (Baloyi & Phumzile, 2022) (Mwandayi, 2023) (Muriithi, 2000) (Agadjanian, 2024) (Mapuranga, 2013). This theme intersects with theological hermeneutics and calls for egalitarian reinterpretations.
Role of Leadership Training and Empowerment programs	13/50	Leadership development programs, especially for women religious, are shown to enhance leadership capacities, confidence, and community impact in East Africa. Training initiatives promote transformational leadership attributes and help overcome socio-cultural barriers, contributing to sustainable church growth and social change (Kinoti, 2019) (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011) (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012) (Ngunjiri, 2006). These programs are pivotal in shifting leadership dynamics and fostering inclusivity.
Youth Engagement and Language Adaptation	10/50	Engagement with youth and language adaptation are highlighted as critical to the church's cultural integration and growth. Studies indicate that using local languages and culturally relevant youth programs enhances participation and retention, bridging generational and cultural gaps (Sanou, 2024) ("An Adventist Missiological Response to T...", 2023) (Parsitau & Mwaura, 2010) (Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021). These strategies contribute to sustaining the church's relevance in diverse communities.
Theological Debates on Women's Ordination	13/50	The ordination of women remains a contentious theological issue within the East African Adventist community, influenced by local cultural resistance and global denominational debates. Research discusses biblical interpretations, exclusionary practices, and the efforts of African theologians advocating for contextual theology and gender equality (Lagat, 2016) (Sorke, n.d.) (Kariuki, 2024) (Kebede, 2024) (Gatumu, 2020) (Nwoko & Igbokwe, 2023) (Mapuranga, 2013). This theme reflects the intersection of theology, culture, and gender politics.
Intersection of Religion, Gender, and Social Change	12/50	The interaction of religious beliefs, gender roles, and social transformation is explored, demonstrating how women leverage religious spaces to challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equality. Studies document women's agency in ministry and community development despite systemic obstacles (Ngunjiri & Christo-Baker, 2012) (Chitando, 2023) (Frost, 2024) (Molobi & Mzondi, 2022) (Baloyi & Phumzile, 2022) (Mwandayi, 2023) (Phaliso, 2012) (Hassan & Silong, 2008). The church's role in

		societal advancement is emphasized through women's leadership.
Challenges and Barriers faced by Women Leaders	18/50	Women leaders face multiple challenges including exclusion from decision-making, cultural taboos, lack of policy support, and socio-economic constraints. Research underscores the persistence of these barriers despite advances and calls for policy reform and cultural change to support women's leadership aspirations (Kabugi, 2023) (Frost, 2024) (Mujinga, 2020) (Kwaramba & Dreyer, 2019) (Msoka & Muya, 2018) (Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020) (Dassah & Nonterah, 2025) (Mapuranga, 2013). These findings highlight the ongoing struggle for gender equity in church leadership.

Agreement and Divergence Across Studies

The reviewed literature reveals strong consensus on the persistent patriarchal structures limiting women's leadership roles in East African churches, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and highlights ongoing efforts toward empowerment and leadership development. Many studies acknowledge cultural and theological barriers intertwined with local customs that shape leadership dynamics and influence the church's approach to gender inclusivity and cultural adaptation. However, divergence arises regarding the pace and extent of change, especially concerning women's ordination and local contextualization, with some studies emphasizing resistance by traditional leadership while others highlight emerging transformative leadership models by women. Differences in geographic focus, denominational contexts, and methodological approaches contribute to these variations.

Summary of Agreement and Divergence Across Studies

Comparison Criterion	Agreement	Divergence	Potential Explanations
Leadership Evolution	Most studies agree that leadership in East African churches has evolved from predominantly foreign missionary control to increased indigenous leadership, incorporating adaptive leadership styles responsive to cultural contexts (Sanou, 2024) (Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021). Leadership development programs, especially for women, have fostered shifts toward transformational and servant leadership models (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011) (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012) (Ngunjiri, 2006).	Some divergence exists regarding the extent of leadership style change; while some highlight significant progress in leadership inclusivity (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011), others note persistent patriarchal and kyriarchal systems that limit genuine evolution (Phaliso, 2012) (Agadjanian, 2024).	Variations in denominational traditions, resistance levels to change, and scope of leadership programs explain differences; empirical studies focusing on grass roots leadership reveal more progress than institutional church assessments.
Women's Leadership Participation	There is broad agreement that women remain underrepresented in informal church leadership across denominations, facing	Divergent perspectives include some denominations or regions showing greater acceptance and	Differences arise from denominational theology, cultural contexts, and levels of institutional conservatism. Pentecostal

	structural barriers like lack of ordination or unequal licensing practices (Kabugi,2023) (Sorke, n.d.) (Mupangwa &Chirongoma, 2020). Studies concur on the need for policy revisions to allow women's ordination and active involvement (Kabugi, 2023) ("Integrating Women into the Leadership of...", 2023) ("Kepemimpinan Wanita Kristen: Pengaruh Da...", 2023). Leadership empowerment initiatives have shown positive impacts on women's agency and leadership capacity (Wakahiu &Keller, 2011) (Wakahiu & Salvaterra,2012) (Ngunjiri, 2006).	empowerment of women in leadership roles, including indigenous and Pentecostal churches where women assume prominent leadership (Mhando et al.,2018) (Frost, 2024) (Mapuranga, 2013). Contrastingly, some studies emphasize on going resistance due to cultural patriarchy and theological interpretations opposing women's leadership (Lagat,2016) (Kariuki, 2024) (Agadjanian, 2024).	and African Initiated Churches may offer more leadership space for women compared to main line churches with stricter policies.
Cultural Adaptation Strategies	Studies agree that churches have increasingly integrated local customs, languages, and youth engagement into their mission strategies to remain relevant and foster membership growth (Sanou,2024) ("An Adventist Missiological Response to T...", 2023) (Masengwe& Magwidi, 2021). Contextualization is critical for addressing traditional belief systems and reducing syncretism ("An Adventist Missiological Response to T...",2023). Youth engagement is recognized as essential for sustainability (Sanou, 2024).	Divergence exists on how effectively these adaptations address underlying tensions, especially concerning syncretism and reconciliation of traditional beliefs with biblical teachings ("An Adventist Missiological Response to T...", 2023). Some churches struggle to fully engage youth or to balance cultural practices with doctrinal purity (Sanou, 2024) ("An Adventist Missiological Response to T...", 2023).	Divergences stem from varying degrees of contextual theology adoption and local leadership effectiveness. Churches with more indigenous leadership may better negotiate cultural tensions than those retaining foreign mission frameworks.
Historical Progression	There is consensus on key milestones such as the shift from foreign missionary dominance to indigenous leadership, growth in membership, and escalating debates on women's roles	Some studies offer more optimistic narratives of progress toward gender inclusivity and leadership diversification (Kinoti, 2019) (Wakahiu & Salvaterra,2012),	Differences emerge from denominational histories, geographic specificity, and focus on either institutional or grass roots developments. Studies with longitudinal data

	over time (Sanou,2024) (Kebede, 2024) (Richter,2022). Challenges like syncretism, patriarchal resistance, and social-cultural barriers are consistently documented (Sanou, 2024) ("An Adventist Missiological Response to T...", 2023) (Mwandayi, 2023).	while others document slow or uneven historical change, with persistent exclusion of women in top leadership (Mujinga, 2020) (Mupangwa& Chirongoma, 2020).	may capture more nuanced shifts than cross-sectional ones.
Influence of Local Leaders	There is agreement that local leaders play a crucial role in shaping governance, adapting leadership styles, and mediating cultural integration, often serving as agents of change within churches (Sanou,2024) (Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021). Indigenous leadership is linked to more effective cultural contextualization (Sanou, 2024) (Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021).	Divergence is noted in the extent to which local leaders embrace gender equity and youth engagement; some perpetuate traditional patriarchal norms limiting women's leadership, while others advocate for inclusivity and empowerment (Kabugi,2023) (KAIRU et al., n.d.) (Mapuranga, 2013).	Divergences relate to differing local cultural norms, theological interpretations, leadership training levels, and denominational policies affecting local leaders' attitudes and actions.

Theoretical implications

The findings from this review highlights the complex interchange between leadership evolution, cultural adaptation strategies, gender dynamics, historical development, and local leadership influence within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa, standing against traditional patriarchal leadership frameworks and advocating for more inclusive leadership paradigms that amalgamate local cultural environments and gender equity (Kabugi, 2023; Lagat, 2016). The continued impact of patriarchal theology and cultural norms on leadership structure is evident, yet there is a developing theological critique advocating egalitarian interpretations supporting women's full participation in leadership, proposing a shift towards more contextual and liberative hermeneutics within African Adventism (Kariuki, 2024; Kairu, 2016; Mwandayi, 2023).

Scholarly discourse examines women's leadership through biblical, theological, socio-cultural, and missiological spectacles, highlighting the need to do away with systemic barriers like administrative and patriarchal ones for true inclusivity (Kebede, 2024; Baloyi & Phumzile, 2022; Dassah & Nonterah, 2025). Transformational and servant leadership frameworks are empirically shown to foster effectiveness and propel transformation (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012; Ngunjiri, 2006). Amalgamating indigenous values creates opportunities for empowering women by respecting African motherhood and communality (Molobi & Mzondi, 2022; Frost, 2024; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021). The literature denies restrictive biblical interpretations, attributing them to cultural patriarchy and advocating for hermeneutical re-examination (Gatumu, 2020; Nwoko & Igbokwe, 2023; Aringo & Njenga, 2022).

Practical Implications

Church leadership must revise policies to formally support women's ordination and empowerment (Kabugi, 2023; Andrews University & Simankane, 2023; Jager, 2023). Cultural adaptation needs critical engagement of local customs that conflict with biblical teachings (Andrews University & Gambo, 2023). Trainings are

essential to equip women with skills to overcome social-cultural barriers (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012). Churches should develop inclusive environments that unleash the diverse gifts of all members (Famorot, 2023; Graves, 2024; Chitando, 2023). Sustained advocacy and education are required to do away with patriarchal biases and systemic obstacles (Kwaramba & Dreyer, 2019; Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020; Muriithi, 2000). Youth engagement and the use of local languages foster cultural integration and sustainable growth (Sanou, 2024; Andrews University & Gumbo, 2023).

Definitions of theoretical terms

Seventh-day Adventists: Are protestant Christians who observe Saturday as the biblical Sabbath as written on Exodus 20:8 and emphasizing the imminent, visible return of Jesus Christ, holistic health, and the authority of the Bible.

Leadership Evolution: Refers to the dynamic process through which leadership styles, structures, and sources transform over time, often shifting from centralized, hierarchical models to more inclusive, adaptive, and contextually responsive forms.

Cultural Adaptation: Refers to the process by which groups or individuals adjust their practices, beliefs, and organizational structures to integrate and function effectively within a specific cultural context, often to maintain relevance while navigating tensions with existing traditions.

Women's Leadership: Encompasses the roles, influence, and transformative practices of women in positions of authority, often characterized by the challenge of navigating systemic barriers to achieve influence and drive change within traditional patriarchal structures.

Global Denominational Membership: Refers to the total number of baptized individuals organized into churches within the worldwide structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Limitations of the Literature

In this review various limitations were noted in the literature. First was geographic bias limitation. Many studies focus on specific regions or countries within East Africa, limiting the possibility for generalizability of findings across the entire region, restricting external validity, and overlooking diverse cultural and leadership dynamics (Andrews University & Simankane, 2023; Andrews University & Gumbo, 2023; Mujinga, 2020).

Second was gender representation bias. Several studies underscore underrepresentation of women in leadership roles but often rely on limited samples or specific denominations, constraining the broader applicability of conclusions on women's leadership experiences (Kabugi, 2023; Lagat, 2016; Andrews University & Simankane, 2023; Mujinga, 2020; Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020).

Third was methodological constraints. Many studies predominantly employ qualitative designs with small purposive samples, limiting the robustness and replicability of findings. Longitudinal or mixed-method approaches were lacking, reducing the ability of leadership evolution assessment over time (Kabugi, 2023; Lagat, 2016; Andrews University & Simankane, 2023; Mujinga, 2020; Wakahiu & Keller, 2011).

The fourth limitation was theological and cultural focus. Many papers underscore theological interpretation or cultural factors influencing leadership, which may introduce bias and limit empirical assessment of leadership practices, affecting the objectivity and transferability of findings (Lagat, 2016; Kariuki, 2024; Frost, 2024; Mwandayi, 2023; Kairu, 2016).

Limited historical scope was the fifth limitation. Historical analyses often concentrate on specific milestones or periods, neglecting continuous leadership evolution and broader socio-political influences, thus limiting understanding of long-term trends and challenges (Sanou, 2024; Richter, 2024; Masengwe & Magwidi, 2021).

The sixth limitation is the lack of comparative studies. Few studies compare leadership styles, cultural adaptations, or gender roles across different denominations, restricting the ability to identify patterns or

divergences that could foster theoretical and practical insights (Kabugi, 2023; Obare, 2021; Munamati, 2023; Jager, 2023).

Insufficient focus on youth engagement was the seventh limitation noted. Literature inadequately addresses youth engagement strategies within church leadership, limiting insights into how leadership evolution interacts with younger demographics and future sustainability of church growth (Sanou, 2024; Andrews University & Gumbo, 2023).

Gaps and Future Research Directions

The synthesis of research gaps and future directions across various disciplines reveals a common theme of underrepresentation and the need for more comprehensive studies. In this literature review, several research gaps were noted, providing opportunities for scholars to conduct thorough or deeper investigations. Among them is the quantitative analysis of leadership evolution. The existing studies on leadership evolution are predominantly qualitative and lack longitudinal quantitative data to track changes over time. Future researchers are to conduct longitudinal mixed-methods studies incorporating quantitative metrics to assess leadership styles and their impact on church growth and sustainability. This is justifiable since quantitative data will enable generalizable insights and clear understanding of leadership evolution dynamics beyond descriptive narratives (Sanou, 2024; Kabugi, 2023).

Another gap is the intersection analysis of women's leadership barriers. Research often overlooks intersectional dimensions such as race, class, and age that compound barriers to women's leadership in the church. Future research may study how multiple social identities affect women's leadership experiences and opportunities. This is because intersectionality is critical for the full understanding of nuanced challenges women face and to design effective empowerment strategies (Lagat, 2016; Ngunjiri & Christo-Baker, 2012).

Other gaps noted in this review that require future exploration are the impact assessment of cultural adaptation strategies, the understanding of which, will help the optimization of church growth and sustainability in diverse cultural contexts (Sanou, 2024; Andrews University & Gumbo, 2023); the inclusion of African women theologians in ordination debates to enrich discourse and promote decision-making (Lagat, 2016); the systematic evaluation of youth engagement approaches (Sanou, 2024; Andrews University & Gumbo, 2023); Theological models reconciling cultural and gender tensions to bridge the divides and foster unity in multicultural church settings (Lagat, 2016, Gatumu, 2020); the role of local female leaders challenging patriarchal norms to inform empowerment programs and policy reforms (Mhando et al., 2018; Ngunjiri, 2006; Dassah & Nonterah, 2025); effects of patriarchal church structures on women's leadership progression to address systemic barriers for genuine gender equity in church leadership (Kwaramba & Dreyer, 2019; Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020; Dassah & Nonterah, 2025); leadership training impact on women's empowerment, to get evidence on training efficacy and guide resource allocation and program design for sustained empowerment (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012), and historical documentation of women's leadership contributions; filling that gap will validate women's leadership legacy and inspire future generations (Sanou, 2024; Obare, 2021).

Overall Synthesis and Conclusion

The literature on the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa reveals a nuanced and evolving landscape of leadership, cultural adaptation, and gender dynamics shaped by historical, societal, and theological factors. Leadership evolution within the church has transitioned from foreign missionary dominance to increasingly indigenous models that integrate local customs and languages, reflecting an adaptive response to the sociocultural and political contexts of East Africa. However, this transformation remains uneven and often constrained by entrenched patriarchal structures that preserve male dominance in governance and decision-making. Despite some leadership training initiatives and empowerment programs enhancing women's leadership capacities, the persistence of male-centric leadership norms and limited ordination opportunities for women indicate significant barriers to full inclusion.

Women's participation in church leadership is one of the most extensively documented yet contested themes. The literature collectively highlights systemic challenges including cultural patriarchy, theological conservatism, and institutional resistance that marginalize women's roles, particularly in ordained ministry. Nonetheless, there is a growing recognition of women's contributions and a gradual, though cautious, shift toward empowerment facilitated by advocacy, theological reinterpretation, and leadership development programs. Women leaders often negotiate complex cultural and religious landscapes to gain legitimacy, with some emerging a transformative figure who challenge traditional norms, especially within Pentecostal and African Initiated Churches. However, the gap between favorable attitudes toward women's leadership and actual policy or practice changes remains significant.

Cultural adaptation strategies are critical for the church's growth and sustainability, emphasizing the integration of local customs, languages, and youth engagement. While these strategies have enabled contextualization and relevance, challenges such as syncretism, conflicting traditional beliefs, and intercultural leadership tensions—especially for women—persist. Youth engagement and language adaptation are identified as vital but under-researched areas, with limited empirical data on their long-term impact on membership retention and spiritual formation.

Historically, the church's progression features notable milestones including indigenous leadership assumption and incremental visibility of women leaders. Yet, historical narratives often underrepresent women and local leaders, tending to focus on missionary figures and overlooking postcolonial dynamics. Local leaders play a pivotal role in contextualizing governance and mediating cultural integration, though male leaders frequently uphold patriarchal norms that restrict women's advancement. Emerging local female leaders, however, signify a gradual paradigm shift toward a more inclusive and diversified leadership model.

Overall, the body of literature underscores the complex interplay of faith, culture, and leadership within East African Seventh-day Adventism. It calls for more inclusive, contextually sensitive frameworks that address gender equity, empower women leaders, and deepen cultural integration, particularly through youth engagement and language adaptation. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and quantitative studies to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership transformations and cultural strategies, while practical ecclesiastical reforms must promote policies that reconcile theological fidelity with cultural realities to sustain the church's growth and vitality in the region.

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