



Church Members' Perception of the Holy Communion in the Central Kenya Conference of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church

Samuel Robinson Moegi

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5893-4482>

Theological Seminary, Adventist University of Africa, Kenya

Email: samwelm@aua.ac.ke

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Abstract: This study explored the church members' perceptions of the Holy Communion within the Central Kenya Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This study utilized the descriptive research design to provide detailed accounts of participants' perceptions and experiences related with the Holy Communion. The study used a sample of 300 out of 6700 baptized church members from sampled churches. Data was gathered using a structured questionnaire with closed-ended items. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics. Based on the findings, the study concludes that church members held a strong appreciation towards the spiritual significance of the Holy Communion. Proper management, clear communication and time management enhanced the believers' perception toward the Lord's Supper's significance. Therefore the study recommends that local church pastors and leaders need to maintain proper management of the Lord's Supper to enhance church members' perception and increase participation rates.

Keywords: Holy Communion; participation rates; spiritual engagement; theological significance; hygiene standards.

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Introduction

Among the most pivotal Christian ordinances in the Seventh-day Adventist church is the Holy Communion. It is also known as the Lord's Supper. In this ordinance, bread and wine are shared in remembrance of Jesus Christ's sacrificial death. For Seventh-day Adventists, this practice holds a significant spiritual value, providing an opportunity for believers to reflect on Christ's sacrifice, unite in faith and experience spiritual nourishment (Bailey et al., 2017). Despite its importance, recent studies highlight a troubling trend: low participation rates in the Holy Communion among Adventists, particularly within the Central Kenya Conference (CKC) (General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics and Research, 2018). The 2017–2018 Global Church Member Survey indicates that only 51% of respondents in the East Central Africa Division, which includes the CKC, participated in the Holy Communion at least once per quarter (Global Church Member Survey, 2017). This is notably lower

compared to other divisions, such as the Euro-Asia and Inter-Europe Divisions, where participation rates are significantly higher (Global Church Member Survey, 2017).

The low participation rate in the Holy Communion is a matter of concern for church leaders, as it may reflect underlying issues related to spiritual growth and engagement among members. The Holy Communion is not merely a ritual but a profound expression of faith and a vital aspect of the Christian discipleship (Bailey et al., 2017)

The ordinance of foot-washing, integral to the Communion service, symbolizes renewal, humility and unity (Mueller, 2004.). Additionally, Holy Communion is deeply rooted in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, signified by the bread and wine that represent His body and blood (Luke 22:19-20). This ritual commemorates the Christ's Last Supper and builds a sense of spiritual renewal, grace and communal fellowship among the believers. By

participating in this sacred meal, Christians are invited to reflect on the Christ's redemptive work and their connection to the broader Christian community (Brown, 2020). The diminished participation rates within the CKC could suggest that members may be struggling with their spiritual growth or face barriers to engagement that need to be addressed. As such, understanding the factors that influence the participation in the Holy Communion is crucial. Low participation in the Holy Communion among baptized members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, particularly within the Central Kenya Conference, suggests significant challenges regarding spiritual vitality and growth of the church.

The Holy Communion is a central element of the Christian faith, designed to build unity and spiritual renewal among believers. However, the Central Kenya Conference, which serves a diverse population across multiple counties, has reported lower participation rates compared to other regions (Global Church Member Survey, 2017).

Inadequate participation in the Holy Communion can adversely affect the overall spiritual health of the church, potentially leading to weakened communal bonds and reduced spiritual nourishment (Muller (2004). Given that participation in this ordinance is an essential expression of faith and discipleship, understanding the factors influencing participation is necessary.

Literature Review

The Holy Communion, also known as the Lord's Supper, is a central sacrament in Christian worship that embodies profound theological significance. It serves as a vital expression of faith, remembrance, and communal unity among believers. The theological foundations of this ordinance are deeply rooted in biblical scripture, but they are also enriched by the insights of theologians who have explored its meaning and implications throughout church history.

Theological Foundations

The theological underpinnings of Holy Communion are deeply rooted in both Old and New Testament scriptures. The practice has its origins in the Passover, a Jewish festival commemorating the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, with the sacrificial lamb symbolizing the future sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Exodus 13). Scholars, such as Schmemann (1973) highlight the continuity between Passover and Holy

Communion, emphasizing its role in commemorating Christ's atonement. Additionally, theologians argue that Holy Communion serves as a means of grace, reinforcing the transformative power of communal worship (Willimon, 2015). Theologian Wright (2012) emphasized that the Passover was not only a historical event but also a typological, foreshadowing the Christ's redemptive work, offering freedom from sin and establishing a new covenant between God and humanity. Theologian John Calvin (1559) articulated the significance of this moment, arguing that the Lord's Supper is a means of grace through which believers are spiritually nourished and united with Christ. This act establishes the theological basis for the Holy Communion, highlighting the necessity for believers to partake in Christ's sacrifice for forgiveness and spiritual nourishment. Fee (1987) noted that the communal aspect of the Lord's Supper is essential, as it not only commemorates Christ's death but also serves as a reminder of the unity of the body of Christ, calling believers to live in harmony and love.

Historical Context

The Seventh-day Adventist Church's practice of Holy Communion reflects its unique theological perspective and historical development. White (1898) posits that the institution of the Holy Communion by Christ was intended to replace the Passover, commemorating His death and the deliverance it signifies. Johnson (2015) supports this view, arguing that the transition from Passover to Communion marks a new covenant, emphasizing redemption through Christ. The historical context of this practice involves a continuity of the Passover's symbolism, which is foundational to the Christian understanding of salvation. Scholars like McGrath (2011) highlighted that the observance of the Holy Communion within the Seventh-day Adventist Church serves not only as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice but also as a means of fostering community and spiritual renewal among members. This dual emphasis on remembrance and renewal underscores the church's commitment to biblical teachings and its desire to cultivate a vibrant faith community. Furthermore, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has historically placed a strong emphasis on the communal aspects of the Holy Communion. According to Rice (1992), the practice is seen as a vital expression of the church's identity, reinforcing the bonds of fellowship among believers. This perspective aligns with the church's broader

mission of promoting holistic spiritual growth and community engagement.

New Testament Writings

The New Testament provides a robust theological framework for understanding the Holy Communion. The Synoptic Gospels present Jesus' actions during the Last Supper as the establishment of a ritual that serves as a perpetual reminder of His sacrifice. Theologians, such as Wright (2012) emphasized that this act is not merely a historical event but a transformative moment that invites believers into a deeper relationship with Christ and one another. Wright argues that the Last Supper redefines the understanding of community and covenant, positioning it as a central act of Christian identity.

The apostle Paul further elaborates on the significance of the Holy Communion in his letters, particularly in his instructions to the Corinthian church (Fee, 1987). The author further highlighted that Paul's teachings emphasize the communal aspect of the Lord's Supper, where participation is not only an individual act of remembrance but also a collective proclamation of faith. The author notes that the observance of the Holy Communion serves to reinforce the unity of the body of Christ, calling believers to live in harmony and love. Moreover, Willimon (2015) argued that the rite of the Holy Communion functions as a means of grace, reinforcing the transformative power of communal worship in the lives of believers. Willimon asserts that the act of sharing bread and wine fosters a sense of belonging and shared faith, which is essential for spiritual growth and community cohesion. This perspective aligns with the understanding that the Holy Communion builds a profound spiritual connection with Christ and fellow believers, serving as a vital expression of the church's mission.

Ellen G. White's Influence

Ellen G. White's writings have profoundly shaped the Seventh-day Adventist Church's understanding and practice of the Holy Communion. White (1980) contended that the Holy Communion serves as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice and a symbol of ongoing spiritual nourishment. Her interpretation aligns with broader Christian perspectives. For instance, Schmemmann (1973) views the Holy Communion as not only a commemoration but also an invitation to participate in the divine life.

White (1998) emphasized the necessity of partaking in the Holy Communion with sincerity and purity,

echoing Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 to approach the sacrament with purity and reverence. White's teachings have influenced both historical and contemporary practices within the SDA Church, reinforcing the Holy Communion's role as a central act of worship and a conduit for spiritual growth. Authors like Horrell (2014) agrees with White, noting that her emphasis on the communal aspect of the Holy Communion service enhances the sense of unity among members, further enriching the worship experience.

Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology employed in this study. The chosen methodology is designed to effectively capture the diverse perspectives of participants.

Design

This study utilized the descriptive research design to provide detailed accounts of participants' perceptions and experiences related to the Holy Communion.

Population and Sampling

The Central Kenya Conference comprises 151 local churches. For this study, data was collected from selected churches across various regions within the conference. The population within these sampled churches includes 6,700 baptized members, from which a sample of 300 participants was selected through stratified sampling procedures. This sampling method ensured the representation of diverse demographics and church contexts, enhancing the study's overall validity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was gathered using a structured questionnaire with closed-ended items. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study as seen in Table 1 (page 50). The analysis took place through the descriptive statistics in terms of mean scores and standard deviation. The overall mean score was interpreted as follows: 1.00-1.49 = strongly disagree; 1.50-2.49 = disagree; 2.50-3.49 = agree and 3.50-4.00 = strongly agree.

The findings in Table 1 shows positive attitude of the members toward the Holy Communion since the mean scores ranged from 2.50 to 3.49 (agree) and 3.50 to 4.00 (strongly agree). For instance, the respondents strongly agreed that the Holy

Communion is a time of sober self-reflection referring to the process of introspection, where individuals critically examine their thoughts, feelings and behaviors in a serious manner.

They also strongly agreed that there is clear communication regarding the Holy Communion dates. This practice is essential for spiritual growth,

as Foster (1998) notes that self-reflection allows individuals to confront their shortcomings and seek reconciliation with God. White (1898) further emphasizes the importance of self-examination in the context of the Holy Communion, stating that it provides an opportunity for believers to reflect on their lives and renew their commitment to Christ.

Table 1: Perceptions of Holy Communion among Church Members

SN	Item in the Questionnaire	mean	Mean Interpretation
1	Holy Communion is a time of sober self-reflection	3.65	Strongly Agree
2	There is clear communication of Holy Communion dates	3.65	Strongly Agree
3	The Church practices Open Communion	3.51	Strongly Agree
4	The Holy Communion is a symbol union with Christ	3.79	Strongly Agree
5	The Holy Communion is a commemoration of deliverance from sin	3.62	Strongly Agree
6	The Holy Communion reminds members of all that Christ did for humanity	3.79	Strongly Agree
7	The Holy Communion deepens my relationship with God.	3.81	Strongly Agree
8	The Holy Communion brings forgiveness	3.38	Agree
9	Hygiene standards are observed during the emblem preparation	3.45	Agree
10	Time management is observed during Holy Communion	3.26	Agree
11	The Holy Communion is necessary for Salvation	3.33	Agree

Furthermore, the respondents strongly agreed that the Church practices Open Communion, which refers to the practice of allowing all baptized Christians, regardless of their religious affiliation, to participate in the Lord's Supper. This practice emphasizes inclusivity and reflects the nature of Christ's ministry, inviting all who seek to follow Him to partake in the sacrament (Long, 2004). Open Communion can enhance the spiritual experience of participants by promoting a sense of belonging within the church community (McGowan, 2015).

The respondents strongly agreed that the Holy Communion is a symbol of union with Christ. Theologian Calvin (1559) articulated that the Lord's Supper serves as a means of grace, allowing believers to experience a spiritual union with Christ through the act of communion. This union is essential for spiritual nourishment and growth. They also strongly agreed that the Holy Communion is a commemoration of deliverance from sin. According to Wright (2012), the sacrament serves as a reminder of Christ's redemptive work, symbolizing the liberation from sin and the establishment of a new covenant between God and humanity.

The members strongly agreed that the Holy Communion reminds members of all that Christ did for humanity Willimon (2015) emphasized that the act of sharing in the Holy Communion serves as a powerful reminder of Christ's sacrifice and the grace

extended to believers, reinforcing their faith and commitment. Finally, they strongly agreed that the Holy Communion deepens their relationship with God. According to Nouwen (1996), the sacrament fosters a deeper connection with God, as it invites believers to reflect on their relationship with Christ and the community of faith.

The respondents agreed with four items in the questionnaire. They agreed that the Holy Communion brings forgiveness. Stott (2006) asserted that the sacrament is a means through which believers receive forgiveness, as it commemorates Christ's atoning sacrifice and invites participants to experience God's grace. They also agreed that hygiene standards are observed during the emblem preparation. Maintaining hygiene is essential in religious practices to ensure the health and safety of participants. According to the World Health Organization (2020), proper hygiene practices help prevent the spread of infections and ensure a safe environment for communal worship. Furthermore, they agreed that time management is observed during the Holy Communion. The Lord's Supper is important in ensuring that all participants can engage meaningfully. Finally, they agreed that the Holy Communion is necessary for Salvation. Aquinas (1274) argued that the Eucharist is essential for spiritual nourishment and growth, as it provides believers with the grace needed for salvation and a deeper relationship with God.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The study concludes that church members in the Central Kenya Conference hold a strong appreciation for the spiritual significance of the Holy Communion. They acknowledge the profound impact of the sacrament in fostering a deeper relationship with Christ, enhancing spiritual growth and providing a means for forgiveness. They also appreciate the management of the Holy Communion in terms of clear communication and time management. Therefore, proper management, clear communication and time management enhances the believers' perception toward the Lord's Supper significance.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the study recommends that local church pastors and leaders need to maintain proper management of the Lord's Supper to enhance church members' perception and increase participation in it. Furthermore, the church leadership needs to create opportunities for members to share personal experiences and reflections on the sacrament in order to foster a stronger sense of community and spiritual growth. There is also a need to ensure that the Holy Communion service is conducted with reverence, creating an atmosphere that honors its spiritual significance.

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