Church Parenting Support Systems for Character Formation of Young Children in Kenyenya District, South East Kenya Field, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Christian children's moral development in today's technological society is a complex issue. Many Adventist Christian parents and Christian communities in Kenyenya District, South East Kenya Field (SEKF) sometimes do not know how to parent in such technologically determined environment. There are acute parenting dilemmas with parents and their children resulting into long-term Christian character failures and frustrations among children in their early age of life, which deeply jeopardizes their entire moral life in the future. This calls for the need for church-based parenting support systems to enable parenting to realize its goal of developing the worrying situation of Christian moral character of young children, especially in imparting moral values consonant to Christian teachings. The study was informed by the perspective of three theories. Faith Development Theory (FDT) by John Westerhoff and the Attachment Theory by John Bowlby explained the independent variable, which is the Christian parents' involvement, while the Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura explains the dependent variable, which is character formation in children. However, the theories supplement each other as the gaps of one are covered by the other/s. The target population was 685 respondents with a sample size of 206 informants. The study found that the Adventist church in Kenyenya District, SEKF, has church parenting support tools/systems for the character formation of young children with 156 (77.1%) respondents expressing their agreement, but they are not fully active and therefore not effective in supporting parents to realize their parenting role for the character formation of young children. The study recommended the Adventist church to seriously train family life ministers and parenting groups to equip them with necessary skills as they accompany families experiencing moral challenges. To help family ministers, leaders, and groups to program their pastoral activities together with families for effective ministry that will impact the modelling of parents for children's moral character development.

Keywords: Children, church, moral character, modelling, parents, support tools/systems, parenting, guidance and counselling

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In today's technologically motivated society, Christian moral values have been placed on a back seat, particularly among the young people, including children from Christian families (Ross, 2017). Fundamental values of respect, honesty, tolerance, obedience, truthfulness, and gratefulness as stipulated in 2 Timothy 3:1-7 are deeply eroded in most Christian families. This puts into question the role played by the church to support parents and the entire community in the task of parenting. Giordano (2010) posits that parents from Christian families have a key role to play in moral character development of young children since they are the first persons and teachers children recognize in the school of life. Despite this, Daly, et al. (2015) points out that there are acute parenting dilemmas with parents and their children across the world resulting into long-term Christian character failures and frustrations among children in their early ages of life, which jeopardize their entire moral life in the future when they become adults.

For instance, in America a report by Feverherd (2018) informs that modern American Catholic Christian families have no interest in fostering their children in Christian values. While Dodge (2015) asserts that Christian parents

have less time and less interest in Sunday school character formative activities, and other religious programs intended to help in building the character of young children. They have no time to educate their young children in Christian values, and instead transfer their role of parenting to other secular systems of society. The same concern is reiterated in the empirical study by Abraham (2019) which found that the total membership of North America Division (NAD) of Adventist church was 1, 218,397 for the year 2016, but the average attendance by church parents, and their children alongside others visiting was only 177, 372 (14.6%) per week as against the alarming figures and percentages that are 1,041,025 (85.4%) of the incompliant and the disconnected and missing laity. There is a critical collapse of Christian form of parenting in American families, where parents are negligent and young children treated as religious grown-ups.

In the United Kingdom, Utting (2007) in his study points to bad behaviour of children as a result of bad parenting styles. Like in America, Mark (2016) in his study indicates that 59% of British Christian parents are not engaged in the Christian moral character formation of their children under 18 years; they are detached from their children. While in India, a study by Jogdand and Naik (2014) noted that there is a Christian causal link between parents and their children in relation to their moral behaviour. The inconvenient behaviour in young children is due to the missing Christian parental emotional influence and support from their parents that are expected to play a major role in their moral character formation.

The situation is not different in Africa. Empirical study by Aransiola, et al. (2017) designated those West African countries: Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone experience serious parental problems in many families whereby over half of the children are in the support care agents, while parents go for a living. But then, these agents find themselves overwhelmed to manage particularly adolescent children who begin to manifest difficulties in their behaviour. Studies by Mkhize (2013), Levitz (2014) and Hall (2018) postulate that in South Africa, many young children experience lack of parental involvement in their religious character formation. They do not live with their parents. Parents are away and detached from the reality of their children's character formation. The lack of parental guidance in character formation of children is a major cause of dysfunctional families as manifested through violence and criminal behaviours among young children.

In Kenya, Ngwiri (2008) reported that the involvement of parents in the character formation of their children is a critical issue. Parents in Kenya overlook their moral obligations to their children, leaving them to grow without parental direction. Helena (2013) posited that there are Christian parents who expect organizations like churches and schools to take up their parental role to enforce Christian character in their children. The cause of this, according to Okello (2018) is that Kenyan parents are preoccupied with other activities that deny them the chance to actively involve themselves in the Christian moral character formation of their children. Amondi (2019) reveals that Kenyan parents seem not to realize the importance of raising their young children in Christian values that positively contribute to their integral development in life.

The situation is not different with the Adventist church parents in Kenyenya Station. A report from the Department of Children Services: Child Protection Case Register (2023) specifies that Kenyenya Sub-County has 26 cases of child abuse, 2 juveniles in prison because of crime, 21 reported cases of juveniles assaulting adults, 3 cases of child trafficking, and 283 children abandoned of whom 20 were sent away by their own parents. On the same note, Youth and Children Friendly Department for Sexual Gender Violence (2023) in Kenyenya Sub- County reported 168 cases of child defilement and 56 cases of child pregnancy.

The specified gaps in the background necessitated this study on Adventist church parenting support systems for moral character formation of young Children in Kenyenya District, South East Kenya Field, Kenya.

Statement Of the Problem

Moral character formation of young children in a Christian environment is not an individual's isolated issue, or specific to Christian parents only, even though they are the primary source and models of character formation of their children. For parents to effectively carry out their parenting responsibility, they need support from the church. As pointed out in the background, Christian parents are busier and full of activities elsewhere hence disconnected from their young children, by neglecting their remarkable parental obligation. They make options on parenting responsibility and freely chose when to commit themselves to family life. Evidence available

indicate that parents are not fully involved in character formation of their children as shown by cases of juvenile delinquencies, child neglect, abuse, early child pregnancies. These parental lapses and misgivings to young children raise concerns that initiate study enquiry on Adventist church parenting support systems/tools for moral character formation of young children in Kenyenya District, South East Kenya Field.

Objectives

The study was guided by a specific objective:

1. To examine church's parenting support systems/tools for character formation of young children in Kenyenya district, SEKF, Kenya.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research question/s:

1. In what ways does the SDA church involve herself in the training of parents for moral character formation of young children in Kenyenya district, SEKF, Kenya?
2. By what activities are church parenting support systems/tools functional for character formation of young children in Kenyenya district, SEKF, Kenya?

Assumptions Of the Study

This study operated under the assumptions that Parents have a Christian role to mould the character of their children, particularly in the early years of their lives, and that bad Christian character formation of young children badly affects the church and society at large.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This section review literature related to the topic which is Church parenting support systems/tools for character formation of young children in Kenyenya district, South East Kenya Field, Kenya. It started with the theories followed by the review of literature, which was done within the context of the variables entailed in the specific objective that guided the study.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by three theories: Faith Development Theory (FDT) by Fowler and Keen in 1978; Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory and the Attachment Theory by John Bowlby. The three theories explain related content interactions between the responsibility of church parenting support systems/tools for character formation of young children in Kenyenya district, South East Kenya Field. Thus, within the umbrella of FDT and the Attachment Theory are explained the independent and the intervening variables, which are the church systems/tools that intentionally target the Christian parents' involvement, while the Social Learning Theory explains the dependent variable, which is character formation in children. The theories supplement each other as the gaps of one are covered by the other/s. FDT gives a four-sequential level of progressive structure within which we realize one's spiritual growth and development in the canopy of faith; and children are assumed as having the capacity to advance the traits of character formation from practical to abstract reasoning as they mature (Olwyn, 2016; Westerhoff, 2000). The four are:

Experienced faith: Faith is about human experience that is a nurtured way of life that informs one's behavior and value system. It is cultivated and shaped by dependable beliefs that are taught during the impressionable periods of life and are received from those who nurture us first, primarily parents and predominantly during early childhood years (Streib & Hood, 2007). The way they mold and influence our lives make an ineradicable mark of character formation on us, creating the center of our own faith.

Experienced faith is faith that is informed and develops through participating in the practices and rituals like prayer, worship, song service, Bible study, and camp meetings of a given church that are conducive to developing experienced personal faith and character, especially in young children. Children, by participating, eventually come to accept them as meaningful/important moral values in life towards the intended character formation.

Failure to develop trust and to attach strongly to a caring parent has developmental implications, whether good or bad, for children's character formation and the practical life of their formed faith.

Affiliative: In the affiliative level of faith, a child strives to belong to a social group centered around imitating what the nurturing parents, family, church or groups do—the beliefs, and values of character formation. The child takes on the behavioral characteristics of the raising parents and becomes identified as an accepted partner, one who is part of his/her faith practice (Boyatzis, 2012). The child comes to experience a sense of community or family embracing the integrated religious values that determines his character.

This level of faith is expressed, at the earliest, during the adolescent children and years. Therefore, a gap of study is real: It is critical for churches and parenting members to purposefully provide and meet an active Christian formation demands at this potentially latent stage.

Searching: This is a curious and critical level of faith and character development in children. It is a period when children are interrogative as of questioning traditional religious church/family values on searching for understanding of the meaning of religious experience such as in Exodus 12:26-28 (Nelson, 1989), which can lead to either accept or refuse the fourth level and values learned; depending on the amount and manner of parental impact involved. At this point, one either become unbeliever or move into the next level of faith.

This is the level that suits when most unusual/cult/drop out groups through social media and the like recruit their members and when many churches, parents, and homes lose young believing members/children. They "drop-out" of church, the faith and moral teachings because they lack personal convictions and live as adults with an immature faith and bad character. If not properly understood, this stage can be troubling to parents as children withdraw from active participation in the life and behavior activities of the church, home, and any predominant persons, parents. It is the most difficult and delicate level where those who are parenting young children should be thorough rounded, well informed and patient enough as to endeavor to meet and entirely address the unavoidable behavioral changes in children.

Owned Faith: The culmination of the faith value development process finds expression in a personal owned faith and, values that inform his/her character. It is a level of a transformative experience, in which a person has reoriented his/her life and now claims personal ownership of and responsibility for the beliefs, norms, practices, and Christian values for the intended character formation.

Christian faith and the development of human character become central to one's being at this level. In line with this study, it is important for churches and Christian parents to realize and plan to provide stable opportunities that address the needs of every one of the levels of faith development.

On improving the four dimensions of FDT: However, the limitation of FDT is that it tends to reduce one's personal faith to stages that are predictable (Wnuk, 2021; Fowler, 2004; Westerhoff, 2000). Nevertheless, faith cannot be reduced to a series of patterns. This gap is answered by the social learning theory and the attachment theory.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory was proposed by Albert Bandura in 1977. The theory highlights childhood importance of observing and imitating the behaviours of parents and others in the interactive society as necessary and indispensable for human character development (McLeod, 2016; Giordano, 2010).

In support of the Social Learning Theory, a study by Hughes (2015) explained that Christian moral values are inculcated into children most by parents who are their immediate family members. But it is unfortunate these days that there is behavioural breakdown, yet Christian parents are not committed to make a positive impact on the character development of their children. Children are left to learn mostly on their own from the rest of society as of the social media and TV, which are outside the parental context (Jackson, et al. 2016; Amos, 2013). Therefore, the Social Learning Theory makes a profound insight into the study in that parents need to be conscious of what moral picture they portray to their children. It helps to critique and account for parents' responsible moral role since children tend to mechanically copy what they see and hear from them.

However, the Social Learning Theory does not directly address parents themselves, their parenting styles and attitudes about parenting and child character development. The theory does not engage with the emotional and relational aspects of parenting; it is not critical to parents who take up the task to guide and lead their children. Besides, Social Learning Theory does not give a full explanation for overall moral character of children, particularly when there is no parent role model in children's life to imitate for a given behaviour. Thus, to address the shortfall gaps by the Social Learning Theory, the study opted for the Attachment Theory of Christian parenting for the character development of young children.

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory was proposed by Bowlby (1907-1990) and is grounded in the natural formation of stable early relationships. The theory is about enhancing parent-child relationships, while reinforcing parents' responsiveness to their children; it is grounded on the assertion that having parents to become 'attached' to is indispensable and critical for young children's moral well-being, since children regard their parents as a secure base for their character development (McLeod (2017).

In this study, the attachment theory is seen to offer a model for Christian child character development, which assesses socio-emotional factors that are essential for character formation of children through the parent–child relationship in the first years of their life (Sroufe, 2011). The children's relationship experienced with parents through Christian values like respect, obedience, love, forgiveness, purity, and patience in the early life is featured to influence their character in adult life (Aronson, et al., 2011; Freeks 2011). Thus, parents are challenged from their relational experience to give their children love, trust, care, attention, affection as they avail themselves to them for character formation.

Issues Facing Parenting Support Tools

Today, parenting of young children takes place in contexts of rough-jostling, violent, multi-confusing forces and influences, which require that Christian parents be informed about and supported if they are to properly model the moral character of their children. For instance, a study by Smith and Denton (2005) on church parenting supportive tools in the United States reported that home and family, parents and the church are on the weaker and losing side to the strong secular competing supportive systems such as school, sports, television, internet etc. Sometimes Christian parents think that their role of care can be substituted by these secular platforms and therefore flood their children with TV programs and animated cartoons. Christian parents do not or have little skills to nurture their children and have frustrated their Christian parental calling through negative practices in their own homes and families, which all necessitate for parenting support tools.

Ingoldsby (2010) argues that parenting support tools help parents to deal with parenting problems and enable them to focus on improving their parenting responsibilities. Studies by Helena (2013), Jogdand and Naik (2014), and Bunnell (2016) contend that parents enter the parenting role with many misconceptions about what is like to be an actively involved parent, how they should act and what may be expected accordingly from children. Some parents feel overwhelmed and do not know the best way of doing it, thus which hinders young children in basic preparations for a more responsible life.

Considering the various aspects of parenting support tools, Dean (2010) explains that the purpose of Christian parenting support tools is to offer programs and equipment that teach and demonstrate the true essence of parent-

child character formation. Gearing, et al. (2012) assert that church parenting support tools help parents to promote child-based care for character development by opening parenting spaces where Christian parents can share their challenging parenting experiences and provide mechanisms to deal with family issues, encourage those who may be finding difficulties in the caring responsibility. In so doing, they see their day-to-day parenting efforts as part of God's plan in the marriage vocation. In a specific way, Beauchaine, et al. (2015), Kasari, et al. (2017), Mervyn, et al. (2017) and Breitenstein, et al. (2020) on parenting programs emphasize the need for parental training of parents to reinforce their parenting behaviour against negative behaviours exhibited in most families. While Breitenstein, et al. (2017), postulate that supporting Christian parents with young children for character formation is especially important when its programs and services are aimed at strengthening parenting elements and factors in the family setting.

Religious Parenting Support Tools/Systems

Religious training of Christian parents is an important parenting support equipment that enables involved parents to inculcate moral character in their children; it motivates them to work for and with their children most in their family settings. It has the capacity to realize and address, educate and sensitize, constrain and underline intended human values, preferences, moral commitments, choices and behaviours. To be effective in their parental task of moral character development of young children, Christian parents need training to enable them foster in their children Christian moral values.

While studies by Nata and Cadima (2019) and Breitenstein, et al. (2020) emphasize that through church parenting support tools, parents have a mandatory obligation to note that the availability and use of parenting support programs to parents with young children aim to improve their parenting skills and quality of their parenting responsibility. For instance, parenting programs help parents to identify parenting knowledge, attitudes and practices that could either give positive or negative development to children under their care; they specifically clarify parents' priority goals for their children.

Adventist Parenting Support Tools/Systems

Principal support parenting tools/systems in the Adventist church include Family Life Ministries, and Children Ministries (Adventist Family Ministries, 2021). They stand unique to maximize their parenting potential upon church members and community (Yi, 2019). Lau (2016) and Garland (2012) pinpoint that family–based churches intentionally include parent-child inter-generational behavior activities of character formation in each ministry and consistently train parents to function as the most prized character draftsmen/designers in their children's lives. The programs of these ministries train Christian parents to be exclusively key teachers and trainers in the character formation of their own children, most when at home.

In the Bible (Nelson, 1989), Family Ministries target parents and their Christian home as the fundamental factors and contexts for the character formation of young children (Deuteronomy 6:1-9). In a family–integrated church, family life ministries call and involve parents, fathers and mothers, to be strong and regular teachers of moral values for the development of character on their children and embrace it as their greatest commission of parenting responsibility with consistence (Isaiah 28:9-10; Hebrews 2:13).

Church parenting tools like the family and children ministries emphasize the need for parents, and without contempt, to allocate/have in their home formative schedules and place or platform where they can carry out formative timetable activities with their young children. It works as a parenting support resource for parental involvement and Christian character formation of parents and their young children (Flores, 2020; Hughes, 2015). Thus, the church parenting support tools/systems prioritize to identify, designate and use Christian homes/parents and relationships as the primary developmental instruments with the most essential settings for the formation of moral values among family members (Adventist Family Ministries, 2021; Lau, 2016).

However, those tools/systems have gaps. There are no data from the available sources that show findings on whether for example Family Life Ministries make any performance evaluations, and feedback assessments on the effectiveness of the available/used programs and activities on parent-child character

formation. Feedback responses are important as to gage the validity of used programs on moral character formation in Christian families.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The methodology employed in conducting the study encompasses research design, study area, target population, sample and sampling techniques. Other sections are methods of data collection, design of the research instruments, data processing and analysis, target population, reliability and validity of research instruments, data collection procedures and techniques for data analysis.

Research Design

To achieve the aims of this qualitative study, the research employed a descriptive design to describe and elaborate the implications of Christian parents' involvement on the character formation of their young children. This was done under the research indicators of church parenting support tools/systems. This design enabled the gathering of adequate and accurate information, analyzing and presentation of that data, and finally its interpretation (Orodho, 2009).

The study also evaluated the characteristics of good and effective Christian parenting in the available literature in order to find out their influence on character development of young children. The evaluative approach was to offer possible recommendations which, if implemented, lead to the solution on the problem of Christian parenting for better character formation on children.

Target Population

The target population for the study was 685 respondents from all the involved 16 churches that were designed to have equal representative sample for the objectivity of the findings. This included parents, pastors, church elders, children, family life pastoral team and church children leaders. Parents were the sampling unit or unit of analysis, while pastors, church elders, church children leaders, children and the family life pastoral team formed the cluster of key informants. This cluster was considered important sources of obtaining the sought information through their regular involvement in character formation with children and also to ensure a balanced representation of different interest groups.

From the target population of 685 respondents, the sample size was 206 participants. This was arrived at by following the formula of Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), which advised that a sample size of 30% is suitable for a population of less than 1,000. This was calculated as 30÷100x685=206 as presented in table 1.1.

Table 1.1: The Sample Size

Target group	Target Population	Sampling procedure	Sample size	Percentage
Parents	320	Simple Random Sampling	96	46.6%
Pastors	13	Purposive Sampling	6	2.9%
Church Elders	64	Simple Random Sampling	19	9.2%
Children	160	Simple Random Sampling	48	23.3%
Family Life Pastoral Team	32	Purposive Sampling	8	3.9%
Children Leaders	96	Simple Random Sampling	29	14.1%
Total	**685**		**206**	**100%**

Source: Researcher (2024)

Sample and Sampling Techniques Sampling Method

The choice and procedure of the sampling techniques was determined by the various demographics outlined in the target population, which for example include parents, pastors, and children. The study used these

following sampling techniques: simple random and purposive sampling. Purposive sampling technique was applied to pastors and family life pastoral team because of their direct experience and informed knowledge of parenting. While simple random sampling was used to gather data from parents, church elders, children leaders and children. The criterion used to choose these clusters of respondents was their daily experiences with moral behaviour/s that are related to parental involvement. Simple random technique was applied to ensure that appropriate and representative sample of respondents is selected for the study (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2002).

Sample Size

According to Mugenda (2008), a sample size of 10% is suitable for a population exceeding 1000; whereas a sample size of 30% is suitable for a population of less than 1,000. However, for a population of 100 and below the researcher should take 100%. Thus, this study adopted the sample of 30% for all the sampled clusters of respondents in Kenyenya district. This was calculated as 30÷100x685=206 as shown in table 3.2.

Table 3.2 The Sample Size

Target group	Target Population	Sampling procedure	Sample size	Percentage
Parents	320	Simple Random Sampling	96	46.6%
Pastors	13	Purposive Sampling	6	2.9%
Church Elders	64	Simple Random Sampling	19	9.2%
Children	160	Simple Random Sampling	48	23.3%
Family Life Pastoral Team	32	Purposive Sampling	8	3.8%
Church Children Leaders	96	Simple Random Sampling	29	14.1%
Total	**685**		**206**	**100%**

Source: Field Data (2023)

Table 3.2 represents various clusters of respondents that participated in the study with a sample size of 206 participants, which comprised of parents, pastors, children, church elders, family life pastoral team and church children leaders.

Data Collection Instruments

For an equal representation of participants, the study also used different sampling techniques and also three data collection tools (questionnaire, interviews and focused group discussions) for specific clusters of respondents. The use of different clusters of respondents and different data collection tools was to have a significant and multifaceted representation that allowed triangulation of collected data for the objectivity of the study findings on Adventist church parenting support systems for moral character formation of young Children in Kenyenya District, South East Kenya Field.

Data Analysis and Presentation

This being a qualitative study, with a descriptive research design, the researcher used three approaches in the analysis of data: content analysis, narrative analysis and thematic analysis informed by the study objectives as presented in the content of the questionnaire, the interviews and FGD questions (Kumar, 2014). The three approaches used identified themes that emerged from the responses received from the field on Christian parenting and character development of young children. Content and thematic analyses presented the frequencies of agreements and disagreements of respondents on specific shared issues. While narrative analysis enabled reiterating the stories of respondents, underlining their experiences, views and opinions on Christian parenting and character development of young children; it took charge of data from the interviews and FGDs. The information from the structured interview schedules was triangulated with that from the questionnaire. The analyzed data was presented through frequency tables, verbatim and charts for easier interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The study presented and discussed the findings of the study in line with the specific corresponding objective: to examine church's parenting support tools/systems for character formation of young children in Kenyenya district, SEKF, Kenya. The study started with giving the response rate to ascertain those who participated in the study, followed by demographic data of respondents in relation to the study and ended with the discussions and reporting of the findings.

Presence of Parenting Support Systems/Tools

Before the actual discussion on specific Adventist church parenting support tools, the study first sought to establish and discuss the results on the existence of such parenting support tools if any. Guided by the Likert Scale format the results were as illustrated in chart 1.1.

Chart 1.1: Existence of parenting support systems for character formation of young children
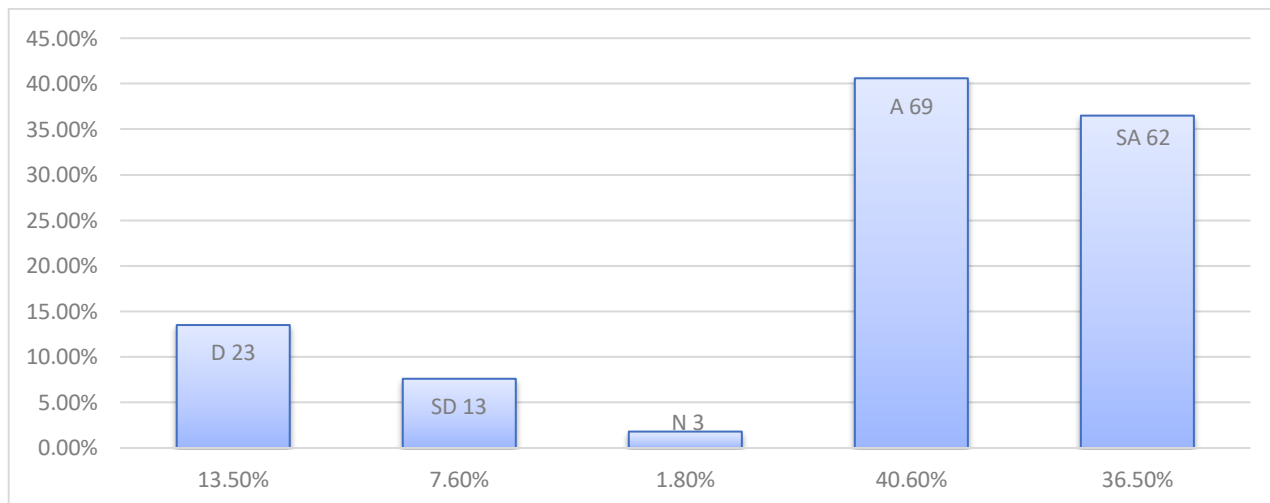
Source: Field Data, (2024)

The findings in figure 1.1 revealed that 21.1%, which was 43 of the respondents were in disagreement of the existence of parenting support systems for character formation of young children in the SDA church, Kenyenya district, 1.8% (4) were undecided, while an overwhelming majority of 131 (77.1%) respondents expressed their agreement with the thesis. Verbatim data from interviews and FGDs indicated the following:

We have several church programs, which serve as parenting support tools to support parents in their task of parenting. We have children ministries that have the objective of formation of children; there are also counselling programs, seminars for parents that discuss various issues including parenting, and so on (KINF, 1).

The church organizes group classes on children and parents to inform them on matters related to character formation, each according to the level they belong. Group classes have different organizations on how they carry out their formative activities. For instance, children ministries go hiking, make campouts and learn other forms of behaviour like nature related, human relationships, respect, and so forth (FGD, 1).

The study noted that those who disagreed with the postulate on the existence of church parenting support tools, were not informed of the comprehensive nature in terms of the church programs. Some have a myopic regard that church programs are only for spiritual matters of the Christian community. Such erroneous regard does not allow them to holistically look at the formative objectives of such programs in the church. The point is that programs exist and overlooking them will adversely affect the moral character modelling of young children in Kenyenya District, in SEKF. The sentiments from the field were later on thematically discussed as demonstrated in the subsequent subsections.

Church Programs on Parenting Responsibilities

After establishing and discussing the results on the existence of church support systems, the study went ahead to discuss and analyse various subsets of church parenting support systems for character formation of young children. The findings were as shown in table 1.2.

Table 1.2: SDA church parenting systems for character formation of young children in the SDA church in Kenyenya district, South East Kenya Field

Item	D	SD	N	A	SA	Total
My church has parenting based training programs that equip them with skills and knowledge for character formation of their children	2 (1.2%)	5 (2.9%)	23 (13.5%)	68 (40%)	72 (42.4%)	**170 100%**
Family Life Ministries and groups are active in helping Christian parents to be good role models of character formation to their children	37 (21.8%)	26 (15.3%)	10 (5.9%)	80 (47.0%)	17 (10.0%)	**170 100%**
Children Ministries in my church have active programs and activities of character formation to children	6 (3.5%)	4 (2.4%)	15 (8.8%)	105 (61.8%)	40 (23.5%)	**170 100%**
There is partnership between parents and church community for character formation of children	80 (47.1%)	55 (32.4%)	8 (4.7%)	22 (12.9%)	5 (2.9%)	**170 100%**
Christian parents and children receive guidance and counselling	55 (32.4%)	75 (44.1%)	6 (3.5%)	30 (17.6%)	4 (2.4%)	**170 100%**
There are church spiritual activities for parents and children for their character formation	20 (11.8%)	25 (14.7%)	7 (4.1%)	103 (60.6%)	15 (8.8%)	**170 100%**

Source: Field Data, (2024)

Availability of Equipment Materials

On the theme of parenting training programs that equip parents with skills and knowledge for character formation of their children the findings in table 1.3 indicated the following: 68 (40%) agreed, 72 (42.4%) strongly agreed, 23 (13%) were neutral, 2 (1.2%) disagreed, while 5 (2.9%) strongly disagreed with the postulate that there are parental training programs that equip parents with skills and knowledge for character formation of young children. These findings showed that the majority 114 (82%) of the respondents were in agreement that the church has training programs to empower parents for character formation of young children. While a minority 7 (4.1%) of the respondents were in disagreement. The data was corroborated with that from the interviews and FGDs, which indicated:

The church supports parents through parental training programs where parenting issues are discussed to aid parents, children, and even to the whole society. In the trainings, the church provides enough written materials to families and encourages parents to take copies for themselves and their children. This implies that the church is a resourceful training centre for parenting the enablement of parents in their parental duties (KINF, 3).

The church embraces parenting support parameters like organizing educational parenting seminars, conducts campouts, and vocational activities of character formation of themselves and expected to impart the same to their children (KINF, 1).

To carry out parental training for character formation of young children, the church through its leadership invites specialists to sensitize families, parents, and children (FGD, 3).

However, other respondents acknowledging the importance of parenting seminars, and training workshops added:

Even though the church organizes educative and training parenting seminars, the young and middle-aged parents as of me rarely attend those seminars with an excuse that they are busy working for their families. The aged and grandparents may be willing to attend such seminars but unfortunately most of the times natural conditions hinder them and are not with their grandchildren as they are with their own parents (FGD, 1).

Because of the busy schedules to work for the families, parents do not have time to be with their children, some even do not live near their children to really understand and accompany them in their moral formative stage of life. There is a straight widening gap of separation, between them, parents and their children (KINF, 5).

The field findings tend towards the fact that the SDA church in Kenyenya district invests more on parenting support systems for children's character formation. This is motivated by the fact that parenting is a dynamic skill that needs to be constantly nourished and developed through various programs. In marriage one is not empowered with parenting skills and gifts. Many young people in the church tend to erroneously think that all about parenting is embedded in marriage as if marriage equates to parenting. However, the field findings also indicate that there are parents who overlook the importance of parenting, which is consistent with Feverherd (2018) who argued that faith-based character formation of children by their own parents is crumbled on the busy highways of modern life.

Moral Activities of Family Life Ministries

On the theme of family life ministries and groups in helping Christian parents to be protagonists and role models of character formation to their children, the questionnaire field findings in table 1.2 showed that 63 (37.1%) of the respondents disagreed on the postulate that family life ministries and groups are active in helping Christian parents to be role models of character formation of their children, 10 (5.9%) were neutral, while a majority of 97 (57.0%) were in agreement with the postulate. These findings were corroborated with those from the interviews and FGDs which indicated:

In family life ministries, we visit homes and have prayer sessions where those having family problems of moral behaviour present their situation to God to heal them from their troubles (KINF, 1).

The role of family life ministries is specifically disciple-based to enable families live as per the values of the Bible. It is centred on parents and children as true disciples of Jesus in terms of their behaviour at home, church and community. This field finding is in tandems with Yi (2019), Garland (2012), and Lau (2016) who emphasize that Christian Family Life Ministries is an important parenting support instrument that sensitizes and equips parents in their parenting/family responsibilities. However, there were those with a different opinion:

Even though family life ministries are meant to foment Christian morals in families, those charged with this noble responsibility do not actually effect it as expected by the church. In fact, some of them are not role models in the ministry as they themselves do not exercise it in their own homes and have an unmannerly record in community. There is a discrepancy between the goals of family life ministries and the actual Christian witness (KINF, 3).

Character formation of children is not an isolated enterprise. When most church families experience family problems like divorce and separations, what morals does one expect from the children in those affected homes? Family Life Ministries is more of home visits and church meetings without a serious program of home problem solving. Furthermore, many of those in family ministries are not even trained to accompany couples that experience difficulties in their homes and marriages (FGD, 22).

Even though Family Life Ministries work with parents to help them in their moral parenting tasks, sometimes there is no elaborate program on how to effect this. It is more of a routine apostolate without a clear examination of specific and contextual moral challenges families face (KINF, 5).

These findings pointed out critical issues that the SDA church in Kenyenya district should take into account; they indicated the importance of witnessing the gospel values by those charged with the responsibility of carrying out family life ministries. They also underscored the importance of training to equip those with family life

responsibilities with skills to accompany families that experience moral difficulties. Finally, the findings underline the core aspects of programming together with parents and making prompt follow-ups and informative declarations throughout stakeholder forums for effective ministry. These three elements are sensitive to young children character development since the young children learn by association as underscored by the three theories (faith development theory, social learning theory and attachment theory) that enucleate this study. Sometimes this is something that leaders in the various church groups tend not to seriously take into account in the development of the moral character of young children. Family Life Ministry is expected to increase the young children's character modelling and discipleship nurture and retention through association with their parents, church ministers lived moral experiences and parenting skills.

Children Ministries and Moral Programs

On the construct of children ministries programs and activities for character formation to children, the questionnaire field findings demonstrated that 10 (5.8%) of the respondents were in disagreement with the thesis that the SDA church in Kenyenya District has active children ministries with effective programs and activities that enhance character formation of young children. On the same, 15 (8.8%) of the respondents were undecided, while an overwhelming majority of 145 (85.3%) of the respondents were in support of the postulate.

Children Ministries are conducted through formation of children groups as per their ages. Leaders are appointed as teachers and leaders, served with teaching materials, lesson guides on specific formative topics and training areas. There are also Sabbath school programs meant for the education of young children (KINF, 1).

The church in her calendar of events organizes District children's day/s with various formative activities in religious moral values and other aspects of Christian life (FGD, 5).

The children's day also comprises of parenting parents in the church meant to sensitize them, families, and the church community about the vulnerabilities of children which includes character formation of children during their formative years (Adventist Ministerial Association, 2009). The findings are in agreement with the findings of an empirical study by Anthony (2006), which specified that creating age-wise, smaller, and proportionate groups of children in Christian churches is an effective tool in the Children Ministries because the tool and its components enhance desirable character learning preferences and minimizes biased possibilities/eventualities in the formation of children's character.

In the Sabbath School every morning, children are grouped up according to their specific ages and needs, challenges and opportunities and then taught basic Christian activities and values such as love, respect and obedience and religious mannerisms of prayer, peace and tolerance that built them in their moral growth and process of character formation. Church children leaders and teachers in these specified classes welcome specified children groups to their respective physical settings for lessons and activities that aid in their character formation. This is usually early on the Sabbath day before could join the main congregation in the church for the worship program, which includes children's moral-based story/activity for their character formation just before the service. Children Ministries pursue to foster children by developing a strong and relevant character on them starting when young at home, especially with their parents.

Despite the overwhelming majority supporting the thesis, there were aspects of children ministries in the SDA church in Kenyenya district that study could not overlook. For instance, there were participants with different opinions on children ministries.

Children ministries have serious challenges ranging from missing/lack of educational and formative materials to lack of experienced and trained manpower. Local church leaders in children ministries lack training skills and therefore unable to help young children in their moral growth. This is most frequently reflected in their favouritism and dismissing manner of treating children from different socio-economic backgrounds (KINF, 5).

Sluggishness on the part of the church to embrace those children that come for moral help or even other forms of help. Children can come to church but the church herself cares less; she is slow to respond and even doesn't take up visiting those children to know their background and challenges—at their homes (KINF, 6).

Sentiments from the field pointed out critical issues about the church and young children on character formation. Proper character development of children requires moral aspects of individual participation. As espoused in the three theories informing this study, children are naturally endowed with curious abilities to learn either form, but what is necessarily needed is something mature for a focused moral guidance on child character formation. The field data also indicated lack of proactive approach by the church to matters of children on moral character development. Notwithstanding the existing gaps/reluctances, children ministries offer children the space and enable them to interact with other children; in them children are given programs that aid them in their character formation/future life.

Parent-Church-Community Partnership on Moral Development

The study went further to discuss the results on the theme of Christian parents' partnership with the church and others for child character formation. The questionnaire findings indicated an overwhelming majority of 135 (79.4%) of the respondents denying the thesis that there is partnership between parents and the Christian community and other stakeholders for character formation of young children, 8 (4.7%) were undecided, while 27 (15.9%) were in support of the postulate. The overwhelming view of those who denied the postulate was reiterated by some of the respondents in the interviews and FGDs.

Today, individualism has destroyed community responsibility in the moral care of children. No one wants to take up the responsibility of developing the character of a child of another person, instead, each one is pulling to his own home and family. Individualism has gotten deep in the church pews and membership, including those with traditional faith morals (FGD, 13).

Moral character development of young people is no longer a community duty. You experience this even in church where no one is willing to correct another person's child. We yearn for those days when a collective moral responsibility was desired by all members of society (KINF, 5).

Field findings demonstrate the fact that character moral development of children is solely left in the hands of parents, the church community is not taking this as its responsibility. Christian parents, including those with problematic children do not esteem the important role the Christian community and other agencies jointly can play in character development of their children. As explained in the background of this study, data on character and reality of child behaviour was not gotten in the church register, but instead from Kenyenya Sub County Department of Children's ministry and from Youth and Children Friendly Department for Sexual Gender Violence. Partnership and sharing of children information between the church and other non-church agencies are adversely lacking. There are no joint programs like visit to children prisons, not even visit to those who have suffered sexual violence and assaults. The church tends to work in isolation, on its own without counting with these other state children departments for effective productivity. It is in line with this that the study noted the views of those with divergent opinions:

There is no man who is a highland. 'Egesomo ngokinia kere ko tikeri kong'ainiyia' meaning isolation can grow one up but cannot make one wise—one can grow physically in seclusion but miss the vital part of character formation. Character formation, therefore, is a communal enterprise that is complimentary. The partnership between parents and the community brings in the important aspect of diversity in the areas of skills and qualities of moral values beneficial to the young children (KINF, 2).

Individual parents and community share widely in terms of parenting experiences, talents, skills, values and activities that when put together give a holistic form of parenting (FGD, 4).

The above field literature is emphatic on the point that parenting is a teamwork activity, which according to faith development theory humans learn from one another and through human relationships and training. And character development of children is a shared activity between parents, the church and the larger society as they all enrich their parenting responsibility through shared experiences, skills, talents, and values. Parents and home-church partnership is important in the parenting mission for child character formation. This is something that cannot and should not be dismissed in the bringing up of children. This means that moral character formation of a society is a multi-value system with interdependent moral forums/components that enrich each other for the

same goal. Therefore, partnership in parenting for better character development of children is an important tool that Christian parents in the SDA church need to embrace.

Parenting Problems Versus Counselling in Church

The study further endeavoured to find out whether Christian parents and children having moral character related problems receive guidance and counselling services from the church. The questionnaire on field results demonstrated an overwhelming majority of 130 (76.5%) respondents with the view that such a service is never given in the SDA church in Kenyenya District, SEKF. And 6 (3.5%) of the participants were undecided, while 34 (20.0%) upheld the view that counselling is provided by the church. Field collected data reveal that,

We have cases of young children being put into children's prisons and hardly is there any church organized guidance and counselling program to help them. Even in the surrounding we have children loitering all over and the church seems not to attend to them in terms of guiding and counselling (FGD, 4).

There is no such a thing as structured and organized programs for guidance and counselling of children experiencing serious and traumatic situations related to character development. It is all left to voluntary, informal and goodwill of some church members (FGD, 8).

Some children are sexually abused even by their own relatives, others end up getting pregnant at teenage in the hands of those who should protect them without any form of counselling from the church. Their parents tend not to take such incidences seriously; some are even bribed not to disclose such offences to legal authorities (FGD, 6)

However, some participants from the interviews and FGDs held a divergent view arguing that there are guidance and counselling programs carried by the church to help parents and children on moral character formation:

The church organizes guidance and counselling programs calling some experienced members in family life to talk to Christians on how to deal with issues of bad morals among children. And also, to children to help them learn right from wrong since they unveil daily important situational encounters of life (KINF, 14).

Even though the church informally organizes guidance and counselling programs, the speakers and counsellors, despite having experiences, lack systematic parenting knowledge and technical counselling skills. It is assumed that the teachings and biblical instructions are enough to equip one to be a counsellor, which is not the case (FGD, 13).

The sentiments from the field findings raised critical issues affecting young children and their parents; issues that need guidance and counselling, but unfortunately not available from the church. The voluntary and goodwill of some group of the church members cannot be taken to mean a church arrangement, furthermore it lacks a legal support and community approval. It is true that at the informal levels some Christian parents carry out evening sessions to story-tell or talk with their children, but this cannot be taken to mean an organized church guidance and counselling program. What the study noted was that the SDA church encourages parents to discuss and share their daily experiences of life with their children. But as was echoed by participants in the FGDs:

There is lack of real committed parenting with guidance and counselling among Christian parents and their children, which has contributed to high levels of young children's misbehaviour in society. Furthermore, there are children who hardly live with their parents, some even do not have parents. Incomes activities hinder parent-child involvement (FGD, 6).

These field findings factor with others that many parents have the lowest rates of general parenting awareness (Hall, 2018). This also means that not every parent can give standard guidance and counselling even if it is at the most informal levels. As noted in the field data not all children have parents to guide and counsel them. This is something that the SDA church in Kenyenya district is challenged to note and be alive to. One thing is having or not having a parent and another thing is to have a true guide and counsellor. Being a parent does not guarantee guidance and counselling to children for their good character. In fact, most parents need guided direction on parenting children for character formation. Today, there is a widening gap of separation between parents and

children dictated by real situations/reasons and the church will be wrong to think that parents are always there to guide and counsel their children.

Church and the Spiritual Development of Members

Finally, the study discussed the findings on church spiritual activities of parents and children for character formation of young children. The questionnaire findings indicated that 45 (26.5%) of the respondents were of the view that there are no spiritual activities for parents and children for their character formation, 7 (4.1%) were neutral, while an overwhelming majority of 118 (69.4%) were in support of the postulate that the SDA church in Kenyenya district has in its program spiritual retreats for parents and children for their character formation.

The church as a spiritual entity takes up its role of spiritual development of members which is an important component of character development. Based on this, its calendar, the church always organizes annual spiritual retreats, Bible sharing forums, worship meetings and prayer sessions for children, and to teachers and parents to spiritually exhort them to take up their child character formation role as a spiritual responsibility (KINF, 2).

We have always had Bible reflection programs, prayer and worship services for children geared towards creating awareness of Christian values that define one's character. The programs have helped us a lot in our parenting responsibility and our participation in them as parents contribute towards taking up our parenting role as not merely a human enterprise. We may do much but without God nothing bears fruits. That's why it is important to always include faith-based character formation in the children's programs (FGD, 10).

Family togetherness in prayers, worship and Bible sharing and spiritual activities such as telling children moral stories of great men and women who have done much to community. This helps a lot in character development of young children, especially in doing the right thing (KINF, 4).

The field data explain that church spiritual activities for young children create awareness of what is right and wrong from a religious perspective. They are geared towards helping children to develop a conscious relationship with God and fosters that relationship, as well as the child's understanding of what is right and wrong in response to expectations of community. This is important for children at the early stages of their moral development. However, to develop a child's character in a faith-based program is not merely giving a list of virtues like listening, obedience, forgiveness, openness, honesty, love, or kindness to promote right behaviour, rather it is the modelling of the child in those virtues realized in the frame of the Bible, worship and prayer where children encounter God through doing things for him such as singing and praise, thanksgiving. Further, church spiritual activities for children involve them in service to others, such that to engage them at their early age is an effective way of engaging them in their faith.

CONCLUSION

Guided by the specific objective, the study made several conclusions. Religious training of Christian parents is an important parenting support equipment. It offers skills and practices for an in-depth parental responsibility. It guides parents on the right ways to nurture their children in moral values. It encourages nurturing behaviour networks as to receive and exchange parenting advice and support in difficult family parenting situations for better upbringing of children. It increases parents' knowledge of their children's development and relational styles. It enables involved parents to inculcate moral character in their children; it motivates them to work for and with their children most in their family settings. Religious training systems/tools have the capacity to realize and address, educate and sensitize, customize and underline intended human values, preferences, moral commitments, choices and behaviors by which children can make decisions that can lead to positive life outcomes. But the main stream of parenting that includes the young and middle-aged parents rarely attend church parenting schedules and are disconnected. Christian parents do not have time to be with their children, are busier elsewhere and some even do not live near their children to really understand and accompany them in their moral formative state of life.

Parents strive to raise up their children in the Christian character value-system, yet in most cases many of them are not well informed of their parenting role and possibility. Many family people, parents and homes find

themselves in parenting situations with little or no idea of what to do as far as character formation of their young children is concerned. Usually, people enter parenting role with many misconceptions about what is like to be an actively involved parent, how they should act and what may be expected accordingly from children. Some parents feel overwhelmed and do not know the best way of doing it, thus making their young children frustrated and not to receive the care that prepares them to go into adult life in a more responsible manner.

Parenting support tools exist in the Adventist church in Kenyenya district, and if they are well utilized by parents, then they have the capacity to positively influence moral character development of their young children. However, those support tools/systems have serious lapses. Family Life Ministries are not fully active and therefore not effective in supporting parents to realize their parenting role for moral character modelling of children. They also miss to use/meet the set parenting measurements. On children ministries, the study concluded that they are active but the local church leaders in children ministries lack training skills and therefore unable to precisely help young children in their moral growth. Nevertheless, the church systems/tools used for the character training on young children need to be simplified and uncomplicated for the purpose of developmental acceptance. It is critical for churches and parenting members to purposefully provide and meet an active Christian formation demands at this potentially latent stage. In line with this study, it is important for churches and Christian parents to realize and plan to provide opportunities that address the needs of every one of the levels of faith development.

To be effective in their parental task, Christian parents need keen training, total and prioritized involvement to enable them stand well for their children on the Christian moral values. Christian parents who receive training learn effective discipline and parenting techniques. Their children tend to have fewer behaviour problems. They develop greater social competencies. The overall argument in this study is that competent religious moral training is key in helping parents with positive behaviours and life skills that they require for the character formation of their children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended the Adventist church: to seriously train family life ministers, children ministries, and other related groups to equip them with necessary skills as they accompany families experiencing moral challenges; to help family ministers to program their pastoral activities together with families for effective ministry that will impact the modelling of parents for children's moral character development. And that the Adventist church should be proactive and a leading role model in matters of moral character development of her members, including young children.

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