

**EXPLORING THE COMMENSALITY BARRIERS IN PROMOTING CHURCH
UNITY AMONG CHRISTIANS IN SELECTED DENOMINATIONS IN
LUNGALUNGA SUB-COUNTY, KWALE COUNTY, KENYA**

^{1*}Dume Bemdudu Sheti, ²Dr. Alex Kamwaria, PhD. & ³Dr. Regina Kinuthia, PhD

^{1*}Scholar, Mount Kenya University, Kenya

²Lecturer, Machakos University, Kenya

³Lecturer, Mount Kenya University, Kenya

Accepted, October 28th, 2023

Abstract

Unity is an important organ in any organization to accomplish its functional objectives. The church as an organ needs unity to retain its reputation, accomplish the Great Commission and perfect Christian faith. However, denominational barriers have contributed to disunity in the church and this has brought a lot of pain to the members. This study examined commensality barriers on promoting church unity in 15 selected churches in Lungalunga sub-county. Structural Functionalism Theory by Emile Durkheim informed the study. The target population was 1049 members from the 15 selected denominations. A sample size of 200 respondents, comprising of 15 Pastors, 15 church elders/ committee members, 45 men, 48 women and 77 youth was selected using stratified and purposive sampling procedures. The researcher used a descriptive research design to accurately and systematically describe how promoting the act of commensality in churches could contribute to the healing of denominational barriers, enhance unity among Christians in Lungalunga Sub-county. Data collection method was through questionnaires for quantitative data and interview schedule guides for qualitative data. Quantitative data from the questionnaires was analyzed using frequencies, percentages, circle graphs and tables, while qualitative data from the in-depth interview was analysed, organized, and presented thematically according to the study's objectives. The research findings revealed that there are barriers in commensality practice such as greed by the Pastors and ethnicity which brings disunity. The research recommends that church leaders should ensure that members in churches can come together at least once a month to share meals. Church leaders are supposed to be composed of equal number of male and female for good administration. The church leaders must be trained on church matters concerning unity of churches. The leadership must listen the voices of the congregation and encourage dialogue.

Keywords: *Commensality Barriers, Church Unity, Christians, Denominations*

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental basis of this study was to explore the concept of commensality on promoting the church unity, in the midst of the many denominations. Commensality is the act of eating together at the same table. Brigida Maroveli (2019) says commensality has a long lineage and has been a milestone of human civilization. Further, she notes that the standard feature of the early Christian worship of voluntary association and Jewish and Hellenistic social life was more broadly on the community meal, the banquet. Christians later transformed the ancient banquets into mechanisms by which for the vulnerable and did so well and all felt to be part in the social comings. On social aspect, Roman James Head said the preparation, the presentation, and consumption activities of the food prepared is nothing but the social setting and the whole activity which is egalitarian and profoundly hierarchical, fostering both social cohesion and competition.

Scott B. Noegel (2016) says, in the ancient Near East, Social Conventions and ideology determined commensal Eating and Drinking. Because eating together was equated with a life of enjoyment, no one was expected to eat while mourning. Weichart (2007) commenting on commensality in Minahasa, Indonesia says, commensal behaviour is a feature of traditional forms of celebrations. He says that the sharing of food and drink as expressed in Eucharist is nothing but a declaration of community among the participants. He lastly says that it serves as a justification of social gathering, which is a bonding mechanism for the community. Spense, Maurizio Mancini and Gijs Hursman (2019) in their article on commensality said it was a key aspect of social dining. On looking at digital commensality, they said that sharing of meals could be undertaken when at the same time watching a video or cinema. For example, people can take an Indian meal, at the same time watching a Bollywood video. Munro and Grosman (2010) affirms that eating together was an important social activity, as is evidence in the archaeological record of communal feasting which goes back to 12000years. Jones (2008) asserts that feasting together is part of what distinguishes us from many other species, as the table is the original social network.

Turning to commensality as bringing relationship between people who eat together, Arvind (2002) says, commensality is a social investment in creating, building and maintaining important relationships. Harry West in his article, "Politics of food" says, "We are what we eat with". This is clear that there is a relationship when a group of people share meals. Brillat-Savarin, a French gastronome who wrote in the 18th century said, "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are". It is in this line that food serves as a distinctive marker of the said social identity. The food people eat can be the mapping tape to use to give a mapping of people of the world. That is, an American can be distinguished by the food he takes for it is hard for him or her to be taking for example the Kikuyu food (Githeri). Cockrel (2015) said that eating together was part of worship in the early church. Many church activities for example worshipping, prayers, teaching and others were conducted during the time of eating together.

African communities also practiced commensality, but theirs was spiritual commensality. People from different communities used different types of food as a way of showing respect to their departed ones. For example, the Zatimary of Madagascar believe there is union of the living and the departed where feasts are conducted and people eat together (Bloch, 1999). Carison (1990) when conducting a research on the Haya people of Bukoba, Tanzania affirms that people share banana bear and eventually placate their ancestors and spirits to receive

blessings, fruitfulness, health, support and protection from their ancestors. The Duruma in Kwale have a festival called “Hanga” where people converge for commensality. They slaughter cows and goats and cook ugali to eat together remembering the departed soul and the festivity can be three, four some even seven days according to the clan of the departed person.

In Kenya, most communities use food as the medium through which physical world can come together with the ancestral. In eating together, the value of the table fellowships deepens relationships, fruitiness and opportunities for sharing faith, biblical study, prayer and worship, which are done around a meal table that brings unity. Therefore, the researcher investigated the concept of commensality on promoting cohesion among Christians in selected denominations in Lungalunga sub-county, Kwale County.

Statement of the problem

The Church is one just as God is one in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The founder of the Church is Jesus Christ, who brought us back to God and made us into the family of God. The Church is one in the Holy Spirit, who dwells in those who believe. All Christians were baptised in the name of the same Jesus Christ into His church, which is One, Holy, Universal and Apostolic. Christ the head of the church has mandated each believer to carry on the great commission and charged all to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria and to all the corners of the world. However, the believers in Lungalunga have divided the church, alongside its many denominations. Each denomination is associated with a certain tribe. This denominationalism has created disunity affecting the church by going against the Great Commission entrusted to the church by the Lord Jesus Christ. It is because of the apparent disunity that the researcher investigated ways to enhance commensality as a tool to promote unity among members of the Church of Christ in Lungalunga sub-county.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical Review

Rainer (2015) observes that, disunity is one of the greatest sicknesses in many Pentecostal churches. He adds that it is a factor affecting religious and spiritual lives of many believers. Doctrines on spiritual gifts for example has caused a big rift in most Pentecostal churches. Some members of the faithful think that those without gifts are far from God and are sinners. In addition, some believers think some gifts are higher before God than others, for example the gift of prophecy which they think it is the highest but while others disagree. Others argue that all gifts are to edify the body of Christ (Church). The use of anointing oil is also another major and big cause of church split in most Pentecostal churches. Those anointed are considered holy by some members compared to those who have not been anointed.

Serwach (2019) observes that, Holy Communion celebrated by churches differ and may cause division in churches. This is an open truth especially when some church members have joined the church from other churches and had been taught differently. Some churches observe this rite every Sunday like the Catholic Church, while others as according to their doctrines observe it differently.

Neffinger (2018) observes that, baptism is a rite of a church and is a big cause of division in the church fraternity. All Pentecostal churches agree on total immersion in water, the difference occurs when to baptise the believer. Some churches baptise immediately one confesses Christ as a saviour while others teach the believer before baptising. The other problem on baptism is the mode of undertaking it. Catholics do not immerse but sprinkle

water drops on the heads. In addition, some Pentecostal churches believe baptism of water and the Holy Spirit is God's direction but others do not believe. Congregation in churches are taught differently which this creates boundaries and cause divisions in doctrines taught. In connection to this, if certain members who have joined the church have been brought up in other churches then this can cause division.

Wesangula (2010) asserts that Pentecostals differ and divide themselves due to some features used in church. Some Pentecostal preachers encourage and insist their faithful to buy holy water, anointing oil, handkerchiefs and other items for the purpose of protection at their homes against evil. If members of the congregation joined from such churches of different beliefs, then sharing meals might not be easy. Competition in Pentecostal churches is also a major problem bringing division.

Finances in churches is one of the biggest causes of division and disunity dividing members which makes them move out of those churches to start their own. This is one of the many reasons of church proliferation in many countries in the world. On this, Kim (2017) says, most outbreaks of conflicts are explained significantly by economic factors. Beyene (2014), Bohlen and Sergent (2010), Conceiao (2010) agree that economic deprivation is a recipe for conflicts. Drenz and Sen (1925) cited in Ikjejiaku (2012) and others assert that inequality or economic asymmetry can be a driving force to conflicts bring disunity.

Adding to this, Mwoyaya (2018) asserts that, political affiliations in church played out within the precincts of religious polity, create cracks in the unity and stability of affected religious entity. Politics contributes a big part in contributing division and disunity in churches. Also looking at politics in the church congregation, those who are not selected as leaders due to ethnic background can also poison the members by politicking on the leadership and grow animosity in the churches.

Theoretical Framework

This research study used Structural functional theory by Emile Durkheim (1893). This theory points out that an "organ" as a result of being interrelated and interdependent, can affect the other and ultimately the whole. This theory fits well with the study of the church as the body of Christ. The body must be a living and growing organism, where different members unite to form the whole. This theory has some importance in looking at the problem of disunity affecting some churches in Lungalunga sub-county. When conflicts arise church members suffers disunity, which sometimes make them to move out of the mother church and start their own churches. Many grieved believers who are hurt in such churches can backslide while others can move from one church to another seeking a peaceful place to worship. The church as a structure therefore is weakened and this affects the other structures. This theory supports commensality as the glue that church leadership should use to bring different denominations together and heal their differences.

METHODOLOGY

This research study embraced on descriptive research design. The total number of Christians in the selected denominations in Lungalunga Sub County were 1049. The researcher used fifteen (15) churches in Lungalunga sub-county of different denominations to get a sample size of 200 respondents. This number of respondents from different denominations is composed of 15 Clergy, 15 Church leaders or Elders, 45 Men, 48 Women and 77 Youths giving 200 respondents. Stratified purposive sampling technique was used to get the desirable sample size. The tools used by the researcher were questionnaires and interview guides. After

data collection, the results were analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The questionnaires were edited for completeness, consistency and accuracy before processing all the responses. After that, they were arranged for coding and analyse using Microsoft excel. The researcher used frequency tables, graphs, pie charts to present the analysed data. The organized data was interpreted in consensus to the objectives using the assistance of computer packages (SPSS) version 20 to communicate research findings. Data from the interviews was transferred from the interview schedule guide and analysed thematically according to the objectives of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Response Rate

The study sample size was 200 respondents and a total of 156 respondents participated in the study. Out 170 respondents issued with questionnaires: that is, 45 Men, 48 women and 77 youths were issued with questionnaires. Out of the 45 questionnaires issued to Men, 37(82.2%) were dully filled and returned while 8 (17.8%) were not returned. Out of the 48 questionnaires issued to Women from different church denominations, 38 which this is 79.2 % were filled and returned, while 10 which is 20.8% were not returned. Out of the 77 questionnaires issued to the youths, only 59 which is 76.6 % were filled and returned while 18 which is 23.4% were not returned.

Out of the 15 interviews scheduled with the clergy, only 10 which is 66.7% availed themselves for the interviews with the researcher. 5 of the clergy which this is 33.3% were not available for the interview. Out of the 15 interviews scheduled with the church elders only 12, which is (80%) were available for the interview while 3 which this is 20 % were not available for the scheduled interviews. The researcher therefore used the data collected from 134 respondents who filled the questionnaires and 22 in-depth interviews, bring the total respondents to 156, which is 78 % of the total sample size, as shown in the table below.

Commensality Barriers Hindering Promoting Church Unity

The researcher wanted to find out if there were any barriers in eating together which hinder promoting church unity. The researcher asked a question on whether there are barriers in eating together.

Barriers in commensality practice

The researcher poised a question to the respondents on if there are barriers in commensality. He then gave three options for the respondents to answer which are: 1) there are no barriers, 2) there are many barriers and 3) I don't know. 15 men (41%), 18 women (47.4%) and 17 youths (29%) chose "no barriers," while 18 men (47.6%), 7 women (18.4%) and 30 youths (51%) said "yes there are many barriers." Only 4 men (11%), 13 women (34.2%) and 12 youths (20%) said "they do not know whether there were barriers or not." From the responses of all the respondents, 37 (8%) said "there are no barriers", 41 (7%) said "there are many barriers", while 20 (5%) "did not know whether there were barriers or not."

Consequently, the researcher interviewed the clergy and church elders to give their view on whether there are barriers or not. Most of the clergy and the church elders identified the main barrier as greed by the Pastors, though they also added denominational barriers and diseases as a great hindrance to the pursuit of Christian unity.

This finding is line with Mwoyaya (2018) who assert, political affiliations have contributed to disunity which this is a barrier, Bello et al (2017) noted ethnicity, conflicts, oppressive ideas, tussles for leadership can create this barrier. In some communities' culture can be big barrier

as Yount (2010) observed that, children and other people are not allowed to eat openly with others due to evil eye. Lastly disease outbreak can be another big barrier in sharing meals in a church. Azembah et al (2012) observes that, denominational rivalry and intolerance between churches especially the Pentecostal he says is equated to ethnicity. Wesangula (2010) observes that Pentecostals differ and divide themselves due to some features used in churches. Aciro (2018) contributing into this says evangelical pastors become rivals as they take church work as business. So, it's evident that eating together has barriers though important in uniting people socially.

Effects of Commensality barriers on church members

The researcher asked the question on the effects of Commensality barriers. The data was as follows: 20(54%) men, 19(50% and 30(51%) youths, agreed that commensality barriers bring disunity. All the data collected was plotted in able 1.

Table 1: Effect of commensality barriers to members

	Men		Women		Youths	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Bring disunity	20	54%	19	50%	30	51%
Unite member	14	38%	10	26%	16	27%
Lack prayers	3	8%	9	24%	13	22%
Total	37	100%	38	100%	59	100%

14(38%) men, 10(26%) women and 16(27%) youths agreed that commensality barriers lead to lack of unity among Christians from different churches. 20(54%) of men, 19(50%) of women and 30(51%) of the youths said it brings disunity between members is a barrier in commensality, while 3(8%) men, 9(24%) women and 13(22%) of youths all agreed that lack of prayers is a barrier in eating together to the members.

From the in- depth interviews clergy and church elders argued that when people cannot eat together they become distanced from one another, are selective to the message they listen to and hated pastors who preached sermons on giving as a way of earning God's blessings. However, to some church elders they perceived commensality barrier positively, arguing that it gave pastors challenges to think harder. This is in line with the scholar McCracken (2011) who assert church members talk about one another instead of speaking to each other which this is possible where there is a unifying factor. On talking about one another creates hatred which leads to disunity. Further, he observed that church members most of the times talk about one another and not to each other, bringing hatred among the members. Fischler (2011) says that meals can be contaminated by conflicts and betrayal unless the risk is lucking. These conflicts are part of disunity created which respondents have revealed in this study and with such churches, many will be fallen as Hormol, Lawless (2015) say that the church is full of fallen believers which this is a recipe to hatred tension, conflicts.

Yount (2010) says that some communities do not allow children and other people to eat together food which this is culture but a big contribution by hatred this divides people. Azembah et al (2012) observes that denominational rivalry and intolerance between the

Pentecostal churches is great and is equated to ethnicity. There is a gap for what the church was left to do they cannot because of without unity, the church cannot accomplish the great commission.

Can the church eradicate barriers on commensality?

The researcher asked a question if the church can be able to eradicate barriers in commensality. This information was plotted in a table 2:

Table 2: Eradication of barriers in commensality

	Men		Women		Youths	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
No it cannot	7	19%	12	31%	2	3.4%
Yes it can	30	81%	23	61%	56	94.9%
Not sure	0	0%	3	8%	1	1.7%
Total	37	100%	38	100%	59	100%

The researcher asked a question to the respondents on if church can eradicate barriers in commensality. Three options were given for the respondents to answers which were; no it cannot yes it can and not sure. 30(81%) of men, 23(61%) women and 56(94.9%) all said yes it can eradicate barriers through commensality 7(19%) men, 12(31%) women and 2(3.4%) said no it cannot eradicate barriers. Lastly 3(8%) women and 1(1.7) youths said they were not sure whether the church can be able to eradicate or not. From the above information captured we see many respondents agree that the church is able to eradicate barriers hindering eating together. This is seen as 81% of men, 61% of women and 94.9% of youths agreed that disunity a result of Christians not eating together. 10 clergy and 12 church elders were interviewed on whether barriers in eating together could be eradicated and they all asserted that it's possible to eradicate the commensality barriers by eating together.

With the above information captured, the church can be able to solve and eradicate barriers in eating together. This is in that for unity be in place, there must be relationships and without it, disunity crops up. With such a situation, the church becomes political where the congregation does not move the same direction. This is what Mwoyaya (2018) assert that, political affiliations in church play within precincts of religious polity, create cracks in tenuity and stability affecting religious entity. This Hormol(2015) and Lawless(2015) notes that the church is usually full of fallen people who are selfish which this is recipe for tensions and conflicts causing disunity.

Conclusion

The study inclines on its conclusion based on the Social Conflict Theory by Karl Marx. This theory helped to the researcher to explain some of the factors that cause conflicts and disunity in churches in the area of study. Finances (bad administration where the leader is everything), politics especially the uneducated leaders, choice of leaders liked by the leadership, discrimination, and others formed the basis of the whole problem in research study. The disunity caused by finances (caused by bad administration), choice of weak leaders, politics (especially the uneducated leaders), discrimination, hatred among believers and others create

room for unsatisfied members to move out of the churches and start their own. What remains with the other members after the defiant move out of those churches, is that they will go out with them as they think are doing the correct mainly because they are poisoned.

Recommendations

The research recommends that church leaders should ensure that members in churches can come together at least once a month to share meals. The pastor and all members must be united and ready to eat with their congregation, and be transparent in spending church money. Church members have to pray for their Pastors, church leaders and listen to him for spiritual nourishment, guidance and direction. Church leaders are supposed to be composed of equal number of male and female for good administration. They should be selected according to their education level and not based on ethnicity or friendship or who gives more tithes to the Pastor. The church leaders must be trained on church matters concerning unity of churches and be involved in decision making of the church. Any problem bringing disunity be handled with care. The leadership must listen the voices of the congregation and encourage dialogue especially at the time they are sharing meals together. Common issues that might bring disunity can be scrutinized and be negotiated to reach a solution which this can be done during eating time.

REFERENCES

- Aciro.G. (2018). *Men of God fighting each other*. Published on behalf of ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL, service fur Entwicklungs initiative n.
- Angel F, Mondez, Montaya (2009). *The technology of food: Eating and Eucharist*, Published by John Willey and sons.
- Bloch, M. (1999). *Commensality and poisoning*. Social Research 66(1): 133-49.
- Bloch, M. (2005). *Essays on Cultural Transmission*. Oxford/New York: Berg.
- Cockrel. L. (2015). *Communal eating in early Christian fellowship*. Brazos press and Baker Academic, Baker Publishing Group
- Cross, L. (1974), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian church*, second edition,(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 340 sub loco.
- Durkheim, E. (1981). *Les Regles de la methods sociologique*. Paris: Press universitaires de France.
- Fischler, C. (2011). *Commensality, Society and culture*. Social science information 50(3-4):528-548.
- Ray, K. (2004). *The Migrants table: meals and memories in Bengali – American households*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.
- Rainer S.T (2013), *L am a Church Member*, Published by B&H Publishers
- Sande, K. (2004). *The Peacemaker: A Bible quick to Solving Personal Conflicts*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books.
- Serwach. J. (2019). *Different understanding of Communion are the primary differences between Catholicism and Protestantism*. Umich. Academia.edu University of Michigan.
- Simmel, G. (1997). *The sociology of the meal?* In; Frisby D. Featherstone m (eds.) Simmel on culture: selected writings. London; sage, 130-36.
- Sobal, J & Nelson, M.K.920030. *Commensal eating patterns; a community Study*. Appetite 41(2):181-90.

- Solnick, S.J & Hemenway, D.(2011). *The Twinkle Defence: The relationship between carbonated non-diet soft drinks and violence perpetration among Boston high school students. Injury prevention.*
- Sotton, D.(2010). *Remembrance of Repasts; An anthropology of food and memory.* Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Stedman. R. (2014). *Old Testament Prayer. The Beginning of Prayer.* Stedman Miniseries. Sanora, CA 95370.
- Talley. D. (2017). *Moments of Jesus Life, Luke 22-23, Biblia Magazine.* Biola University 13800 Biola Avenue La Miranda, CA 90639.
- Vahakangas, M. and Kyomo, A.A. eds.(2003). *Charismatic Renewal in Africa.* Nairobi: Action Publishers.
- Walker, J. (2012). *Ntsambu, the foul smell of food, commensality and Identity in the Comoros and the diaspora. Food and Foodways: Explorations in the History and culture of human nourishment,* 20,187-210.
- Warmiid. M. (eds.) et al. (2015). *Commensality from Everyday Food to Feast,* Bloomsbury Academic.
- Wansink, B. (2006). *Mindless Eating: Why we eat more than we think.* New York, NY: Random House.
- Winroth, A. (2000). *The making of Gratian's Decretum,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wrangham. R. (2009). *Catching Fire; how Cooking made us Human.* New York: Basic Books.
- Yount, C. (2010), *Tout a change sauf le Repas; les habitudes alimentaires dakaroises face au changement socio –economique .* Memories de master, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en sciences sociales –Centre – Edger, Morin, Paris.
- Zaboni. J. (2018). What is meaning of Sample Size? *Journals Samang,* Leaf Group Ltd., Legal Derparmen, 1655 26 street, Sana Monica, CA 90404, U.S.