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Ascertaining Prayer as a Means of Spiritual Growth.

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Abstract

This study is based on prayer as means of spiritual growth in the Nakuru South Seventh-Day Adventist church. It is based on mixed methods of research design. It utilizes both qualitative and quantitative methods of research. The findings on this study indicated that prayer is a fundamental aspect of a believer's spiritual growth. Living a prayerful life is a sign that one has an existing relationship with God and vice versa. As God responds to the prayers, believers in turn are motivated. The study ascertained that prayer was an essential means of spiritual growth, where a mean score of 3.769 was obtained. The study recommended that the clergy and church leadership needs to encourage, train, educate and instruct believers daily and regularly on prayer even in their homes. Furthermore, the church should form small prayer groups for purposes of praying together; hence this will nurture and mentor members more than in a large group.

Key Terms: prayer, spiritual growth, Seventh - day Adventist, apostles.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The early church remains a good example for believers to learn from. This is the church that had the apostles as its leaders. The apostles had walked with Jesus Christ and had had His instruction first hand. Therefore, they were well placed to instruct the other believers on their spiritual growth and well-being. In Acts 2:42, the Bible records that the early church continued steadfastly in the apostle's fellowship and doctrine, bread breaking, and prayers. The *New Interpreters Bible* (2002) is commenting on this verse state, "The Christian norm reflected in this text and others like it in Acts is that believers who share a common geographical address are to share a common religious life. The common characteristics of this common life are listed in verse 42 and elaborated in the following verses: apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer." These characteristics identified and made them a unique Christian community that greatly affected the known world then.

There has been a decrease of members attending church prayer meetings in the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Nakuru south and an increase in the number of members joining Pentecostal Christian in worship, including prayer meetings and casting of spells. This approach to spirituality contravenes the Adventist way of prayer and destabilizes the spiritual steadfastness of those members who go to such meetings. As a result, some become irregular in church attendance, while others even leave the Seventh-day Adventist faith to join other churches. Those who have this dual allegiance copy and or emulate the Pentecostal system of prayer and programs. They attempt to bring various contradictory prayer practices into the Seventh-day Adventist church. Hence, this necessitates studying this challenge and addressing it properly.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the creation story (Gen 1, 2); the Bible gives an account of how human beings came into existence. First, God made them in His image and likeness. Then, he breathed unto them the breath of life, and they became living beings. Keller (2015) observes that "the inspiration of God's life-giving breath into man's nostrils begins what may be seen as a prototype for prayer that is manifested in a variety of ways throughout the Hebrew Scriptures." God's initiative is probably the beginning of a prayerful relationship. He is interested in a mutual relationship with His created beings. In other words, prayer stems from human helplessness and want. It indicates that people are not self-sufficient, for they are ignorant about their nature without God.

Men and women are created in a way that, in their inmost nature, they must revere a superior being, a vacuum that nothing else can replace. In describing the prayer life of the Graeco-Roman world, Alikiri (2010) indicates that "people prayed to gods on different occasions: in religious rituals, at public events, and home before the laves. It was also customary among non-Jews to say prayers to the gods at their banquets.... whenever people in the Graeco-Roman world gathered for a communal banquet, they found it natural to pray to their gods." One wonders why people could not do their business without first invoking the presence of God. People

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innately suppose that prayer gives them the ability to overcome a danger or difficulty they face and that prayer is given in thanksgiving for the blessings they enjoy.

From the very beginning, prayer has evolved and taken different shapes, but it is done to fill the void of those who seek God. To this, Clark (2017) wrote, “Throughout Israel and the Diaspora, the people had been meeting in synagogues or houses of prayer for the purpose of reading the Torah and praying together. As they were gathered, they were experiencing the presence of God in a new way.” It is true that from time memorial people have yearned for the presence of God in their dwellings and activities. Prayer expresses a human desire to enter into close contact with the holy God. As part of that desire, prayer is taken as a link and an assurance of the presence of God. Whether they are believers or not, people submit themselves and their fears or joys to a superior being.

The impulse to pray is deep within the human heart; it is at the very centre of a person’s being. Likewise, prayer is at the heart of a faith’s journey. Calian (1998) proposes that “what we pray for and how we think about God are closely related... church education must centre on God, for we come from God, God sustains us, and our destiny is to be with God. Prayer is our way of expressing trust in God and finding affirmation as we move close to the divine purpose and meaning of life. We are restless until we find our rest in God.” In other words, prayer awakens in the believers the fact that their lives are in the hands of the Almighty God and that it is in prayer that they can appreciate His goodness and mercies. Furthermore, it is in prayer that they can have God’s direction and leadership in order to follow Him as He leads them.

During the early church period, while it was in its initial stages of establishment, Jesus put forth matters that were important to believers. The laid foundation was important because all believers who followed the way were to build on it. The church head, Jesus Christ, was physically present to lay such a foundation. In this period of time, Jesus manifested His intimacy with God in His teachings and way of life. He showcased that His union with His Father made His teachings authoritative and miracles possible. His greatest passion was to share His relationship with God with everyone drawn to Him. Jesus mentored His disciples in prayer. Thus, believers will do well when they learn from the disciple’s interactions with the Master. Keller (2015) mentions that “when the disciples asked Jesus, Lord teach us to pray, they were not asking for abstract information or methods. They, like Jesus, were devout first-century adult Jews and followed a strict pattern of prayer throughout each day. They were saying, Lord, we want to become like you.

The disciples of Jesus saw a direct relationship between his life of prayer and his active engagement with society.” Wanting to be successful as their Master, the disciples longed to imitate Him and work His works. The secret was in His prayer life, hence a request from the disciples to be taught how to pray. This request further explains how important it is to have an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. He used prayer to mentor and grow the spirituality of His disciples. The believers can use the same method to mentor others as they endeavour to build up their spiritual life.

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When members appreciate the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and His leading, then they will be eager to put to practice Christianity. It will be their desire to do and walk according to the Spirit (Gal 5:22). Therefore, such practices as fasting and prayer, building a mutual relationship with God, receiving spiritual power through prayer, organizing and attending spiritual retreats and mid-week prayers will be a joy to fulfil.

In defining fasting, Baab (2016) opines, “fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific time, for a spiritual purpose, by an individual, family, community, or nation.” Fasting is an essential spiritual discipline, and the Bible explains the benefits gained by practising it; despite that, most believers do not practice fasting or emphasize it in their life. However, when one is fasting, there should be a genuine reason, such as growing one’s relationship with God. Holmes (2009) speaks of two main goals related to fasting, “firstly, to know God better and be closer to him, and also to see changes and breakthroughs in areas that would otherwise not be possible. Fasting is personal, relational, and intimate to begin with. A personal relationship with God is foundational to ministry.” And such fasting plays an important role in both the individual and community life of believers.

Fasting provides an opportunity to discipline the body and bring it into subjection (1Cor 9:27). It is not done to bribe God to listen nor manipulate Him to act one’s way, but it is an effort to train the body to hunger and thirst for God. In the book *Finding Freedom in Jesus*, the author suggests that “it is fasting that strengthens one’s intimate relationship with God. A fast may help us deepen our desire, our devotion, and our openness to God. A fast can produce a closeness with God that allows us to become open and vulnerable as when two people experience physical oneness” (Bauer, 2018). Fasting produces closeness to God that is fulfilling and rewarding. Its results do not affect only the one fasting but can go beyond to only where God knows.

Prophet Isaiah states that people abuse or neglect acceptable fasting (Isa 58:3-4). The situation and everything they were doing did not please God. The shame of the behaviour they do is seen when fasting is revealed, “Look you fast only to quarrel and fight and to strike with a wicked fist” (v.4). The motive to fast is totally wrong; however, that does not mean fasting is wrong. God then spelt out through the prophet the fast that pleases Him. In Isaiah 58:6, He says: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” God is pleased with fasting people whose motive is to break the enemy’s yoke and undo what the devil has done to enslave humanity.

Fasting and prayer are religious disciplines that are valued and cherished by different religions. However, the focus is the Christian community and especially the Adventist church. Important as fasting and prayer are, they are not meant to be for public display of personal prowess. Fasting is often a prelude and a means to a deeper spiritual experience. Moses fasted 40 days before God gave him the Ten Commandments. Jesus Christ fasted the same period of time before His public ministry. In spite of the importance of fasting and prayer, not all church members follow it.

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When these spiritual disciplines are practised, the believers will immensely benefit. Power encounters mostly refer to warfare between God and Satan. However, the Bible indicates that such encounters did happen. When they happened, God demonstrated His power over that of Satan and his agents through signs and wonders. As Sanou (2019) states, “These signs and wonders became the symbols not only of God’s supreme power but also of His presence, protection and provision. They also became a source of motivation for eye-witnesses to either renew their relationship with God or to acknowledge His supreme authority.” Signs and wonders can represent a superior power that is cosmic in nature.

Jesus Christ’s ministry included power encounters in order to challenge and defeat the powers of the archenemy, the devil. Indeed, His whole ministry was a power encounter because He was at the centre of the Great Controversy (White, 1940). In His ministry, Jesus healed all manner of diseases and sickness. For Jesus, according to Luke’s gospel, it was His natural practice to heal the sick and deliver people from demon possession any time He entered a new region (Luke 4:33-35, 39: 5:13-15; 6:6-10). Further, Sanou (2019) observes: “Just like biblical peoples, most people today, especially in non-Western societies, also see the world as inhabited by evil spirits that cause trouble if they are not appropriately dealt with. As such, power encounters are still necessary for initial conversion. It is also a vital part of the building up of the church.” People live with fear because of the ills and evil powers in this world. But believers do well to find refuge and power to overcome those fears and evil through their prayer life.

When people have a fear of almost everything around them, this calls for something more, especially when they convert to Christianity. Such people who join the church from these power-oriented backgrounds are deeply rooted in spirit powers, charms, and amulets because they believe they are at the mercy of evil spirits, demons, the evil eye, curses and other spiritual forces. Sanou (2019) indicates that “such people live in a constant state of fear of retaliation from the spirits or the harm an enemy can place on them through some form of spiritual power. As such, they are more concerned about healing, deliverance, and protection than they are about truth. Therefore, the Christ who is the remedy for their fears will often be more attractive than the Christ who saves them from their sins.” Truth as it is in Jesus Christ and His power should be emphasized more often to such new converts because, when they come from an animistic background and find within Christianity little or none of the powers, they long for a meeting of their needs for healing, protection, blessing, guidance, even deliverance from demons. And if there is this lack, it easily leads them to continue their pre-Christian practice of going to diviners, miracle workers and the like for spiritual power. This compromises their allegiance to God and makes their Christianity of non-effect; hence they practice dual allegiance. In realizing the power that God unleashes to His people, such new converts can rest assured that God protects His people.

It is not God’s will for humanity to suffer. Evil, sin, and sickness are manifestations of what God does not will. Bloesch (1988) reflects that “God allows evil to have a provisional reality so that his power might be demonstrated against it and so that greater good might eventuate. ...He uses evil to bring evil to nought. God

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is not the direct cause of evil, but he is the cause of the overthrow of evil. This means that in our prayer life, we should not meekly submit to evil but instead boldly lay hold of the power of God to combat evil and overcome it.” Behind the world’s suffering, discord, and tribulation is a demonic adversary of God and human beings. This devil is superior to human beings but inferior to God, who is all-powerful. Converts should realize that God is still ultimately in control. Spiritual warfare is a reality that Jesus did not ignore in His ministry. He did not see Satan and demonic forces as myths and superstition. He saw these forces as real enemies from which people needed to be set free. When the converts to Christianity experience the all-powerful God who can control the enemy spirits and how they interfere in their lives, they can stand steadfast in church and mentor other disciples. They must themselves experience a life transformation that comes by experiencing it personally. For in God, there is spiritual power to heal, bless, and overcome the power of demonic spirits that have held them captive.

Spiritual retreats are times set aside by an individual or group when they move away from their daily chores to a solitary place to commune with God. They purposively withdraw to a place where the concentration is focused on spiritual things alone. It takes mature spiritual Christians to mentor younger ones using spiritual retreats. A spiritual experience does not just happen without an effort from a member. It took Moses 40 days and nights to be alone on the mountain to commune with God. And when Moses left that presence of God, his face was gloriously shining from the glory of God. Spiritual retreats are times of silence and reflection. Quiet places free of noise where distractions are avoided enable one to reflect and contemplate the love of God. These are safe places for privacy with God, who rewards such humble experiences. When members are together in silence and prayer, they build bonds of a grace-filled and loving community.

There are immense benefits of spiritual retreats. As Maclafferty (2013) testifies, the retreats give the opportunity to review one’s life and seek God’s vision. He states, “Every year, it has become a time for God to provide me with encouragement as well as a needed course correction. It has become a time for renewal in my friendship with God. It has become a time to receive a fresh vision from God that will impact every part of my life.” In other words, experiencing God through His Word and prayer deepens people’s hunger for spiritual growth. It stimulates the desire to live a godly life and serve God. When an individual believer has thus benefited from the personal retreat, he/she can easily mentor guide new believers to embrace spiritual retreats.

It is in the spiritual retreats that one is able to listen, plan, and reflect. Out of the daily busy schedule and alone with God, a believer is able to listen to God’s will as he/she meditate from His Word. And it is when an individual takes time to listen to God that he/she can be able to know the small still voice of God. This helps one to plan and reflect on the spiritual life and make adjustments accordingly. Listening requires someone to practice it and the way to do it is through the Word, the Bible. It provides the basis by which all other sources to hear God become available. The sole aim of listening is to hear God speak to the heart and mind of a believer. As Reynaud and Bogacs (2017) submit, one can hear God through another person. They say, “Spiritual mentors

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are another way for us to hear the word of God, as we practice submission and mutual accountability. Mentors are a key feature in the development of spiritual discernment.” Hence, listening to God is critical in a believer’s spiritual development and posterity. Therefore, the believer is to be keen on listening to God from the Scriptures as well as paying attention to God’s spokespersons.

3.0 RESULTS

Prayer plays an important role in mentoring the spiritual growth of members. When believers are taught and guided on how to do the prayers, their spiritual lives are nourished and well directed. Prayer builds relationships; hence mentoring new believers is a lifestyle that mature spiritual members need to adapt. It is in mentoring that one can experience and witness life transformation. The joy of seeing a new convert live a Christ-like life simply because of careful guidance in the steps of prayer and letting such a person develop a close relationship with God is indeed a benefit of mentoring.

Connecting with God through prayer is an important aspect for Christians to grow their spirituality and also to encourage the faith community. Understanding that prayer is power and a means through which Christians can attain spiritual maturity leads many to yearn to pray. Praying well, therefore, is a means of mentoring others, and this is what the church requires at this end times. Prayer enabled the apostles and the early church to accomplish great good and perform miracles for the good of the church community. Therefore, earnest believers should know how to talk to God through prayer and how to listen to God through reading the Scriptures so that they develop an intimate relationship. To strengthen this relationship and satisfy the emotional and spiritual needs, the members are privileged to learn the power of prayer, hence mentoring spiritual growth through prayer.

However, prayer lethargy, especially on a personal level, is a great threat to the believer’s faith commitment to God. When an individual lacks time to commune with God, it tends to develop unchrist-like conduct. Furthermore, to develop oneself spiritually, one needs moments of meditation on the Word of God, thus allowing the Holy Spirit to impress the Christian virtues into ones’ life.

The early Christian church did not flourish to goodness without the active involvement and careful prayer mentoring. Spiritual maturity was what the apostles worked up to and encouraged everyone else to attain. In Colossians 1:9-13, the scripture emphasizes the fact that prayer brings about the filling of God’s people with knowledge of Him and understanding. This indicated that they would lead lives worthy of the Lord fully pleasing to Him and bearing fruit in a manner that will help and support others to be fruitful in every good work as they grow in the knowledge of God. Hence, they will be made stronger from the strength that comes from the glorious power of God. Consequently, they have the boldness to ask anything according to God’s will, and God hears (1John 5:14-15). Because of these benefits gained from prayer, it will be paramount to adhere to Paul’s admonition to the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17).

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God speaks to humanity through His written Word, the Scriptures. In the Scriptures, the will of God is made known to all who may desire to follow it. The Bible is designed to enable the reader to discern, hear, and do the will of God. The Bible is not a book for only a chosen few. Hence, prayer makes sense when one immerses himself/ herself in the Word, learning and being educated by God. Prayer plays an important role in mentoring the spiritual growth of members. When believers are taught and guided on how to do the prayers, their spiritual lives are nourished and well directed. Prayer builds relationships; hence mentoring new believers is a lifestyle that mature spiritual members need to adapt. It is in mentoring that one can experience and witness life transformation. The joy of seeing a new convert live a Christ-like life simply because of careful guidance in the steps of prayer and letting such a person develop a close relationship with God is indeed a benefit of mentoring.

Training men and women to be disciples enhances the spiritual growth of members. Training believers' endeavour to live Christ-like lives motivates their learners to be like their Master, Jesus Christ. This leads to building up relationships with other believers and God. Hence, prayer becomes a means by which people reach God and God in His love and mercy gives them the power to encounter evil powers and all types of diseases and illnesses. They find in Him the One who is all-powerful and sufficient. Spiritual retreats are handy in growing the spirituality of members. These moments reenergize participants and give them a new focus, especially on their spiritual journey. In addition, retreats help members do an introspection of their spiritual life with the aim of walking closely with the Master. This leads to finding mid-week prayers beneficial, as they are times to seek God and intercede for others.

The sole aim of transformation is to have Christ formed in a believer's life in order to ultimately restore the lost image and likeness of Jesus Christ. In Galatians 4:19, Paul stresses the idea of Christ being formed in the believers. The indwelling Christ transforms the inner being and creates it after His own likeness, thereby making the transformed believers become disciples who can mentor others for spiritual growth. In mentoring for discipleship, Jesus Christ's method is an example par excellence to adapt. In the gospels, one is able to see how Jesus did it. The disciples observed Him do the miracles, heard Him preach, saw Him praying, and witnessed how He lived. In Luke 9:1, Jesus called the twelve, gave them power and authority, and sent them out. Hence, when believers enjoy an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, they can probably do much more than the apostles accomplished.

It is important to place the highest value on relationships, especially with God. Having a good relationship with God is the highest and most valuable thing one can possess. When one has the right connection with God, it becomes easy to relate horizontally with fellow human beings. Accepting to take God first than any other person or thing such as money, work, and business reveals a sense of belonging, which strengthens a believer's relationship with God.

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It is important to place the highest value on relationships, especially with God. Having a good relationship with God is the highest and most valuable thing one can possess. When one has the right connection with God, it becomes easy to relate horizontally with fellow human beings. Accepting to take God first than any other person or thing such as money, work, and business reveals a sense of belonging, which strengthens a believer's relationship with God. Accordingly, members are encouraged to pray. When the mid-week prayer sessions are geared towards praying and seeking for the Holy Spirit, a change will occur. Believers will be actively involved in the mission of God, and the church will become vibrant in preparing people for Christ's second coming. As a result, the relationship between believers and God will be strengthened.

It is a prayer that brings God and people together. Men and women hardly understand or comprehend what happens to the human mind and soul when they enter into communion with God (cf. James 5:19). In an encounter with God through prayer, our minds become spiritually and morally renewed, with our being reenergized and nurtured. We are enabled to stand before God to serve Him. God's grace and power reach us directly and personally reach us through prayer. Being strengthened and renewed in mind is an advantage that comes to those who give themselves to prayer. It is prayer. Therefore, that brings about spiritual vigour. If spirituality is to survive, then prayer has to be the way of life.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Prayer, when utilized well, is a means of mentoring other believers and growing their spirituality to maturity. Prayer, therefore, plays a pivotal role in the spirituality of members.

Recommendations: After completing this study, the researcher recommends that the clergy and church leadership needs to encourage, train, educate and instruct believers daily and regularly on prayer even in their homes. Furthermore, the church should form small prayer groups for purposes of praying together; hence this will nurture and mentor members more than in a large group.

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