

FACTORS HINDERING CHURCH GROWTH IN RWANDA: A CASE STUDY OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF RWANDA (LCR)

Abstract.

There are several factors that can cause the church not to grow. Some of these factors include lack of enthusiasm for evangelism, internal squabbles, weak discipleship, pastors who are not developed in leadership and weak stewardship. In order for the church to adhere to the great commission, it is imperative for church growth. "Church Growth" is the discipline that seeks to analyse how Christian churches grow, both numerically and spiritually. Numerical growth can include attendance at worship, membership and the number of congregations. Spiritual growth is measured by how people seek the love of God and practices to the neighbours. However, it is harder to quantify, but it is an essential part of the subject.

The findings revealed that lack of strategic plan for evangelism, lack of Christian stewardship and lack of leadership skills are among the factors that contributed to making the LCR not to grow. It is therefore recommended that there should be a proper plan for evangelism methods like house to house evangelism, open air meetings and seminars. It is further recommended that Christians of the LCR should take their responsibilities to ensuring that they use their gifts, time, money and talents to make sure that the church grows both spiritually and numerically.

The research concludes that the LCR has all the potentiality to grow spiritually and numerically. The church has to take advantage of the growing number of the citizens in Rwanda especially in big cities like Kigali to expand and grow. For this to happen, new strategies for evangelism and discipleship together with mutual relationships between leaders and congregants are most needed.

Keywords: Church growth, Lutheran church of Rwanda, Protestantism

Introduction

1. Background of Lutheran Church of Rwanda

"Lutheranism originated within the Roman Catholic Church as a movement with the call for a public debate regarding several issues within the Catholic Church by Martin Luther. Issues like the authority of the Pope, sacraments and how one is justified as a believer. It was in the 16th century where the movement gained autonomy after Martin Luther being chased from the Roman Catholic Church. This movement soon spread throughout northern Europe and became the driving force behind the wider Protestant Reformation. Nowadays, Lutheranism has spread from Europe to other parts of the world including Africa" (Lund, 2002).

In 1907 two German Lutheran pastors, Ernest Johanssen and Gerhard Ruccius, from the Bethel mission society known as *Evangelische Missionsgesellschaft für Deutsch-Ostafrika* founded in 1886. Lutheran Church reached in Rwanda in 1907 by Missionary Johansen. Johanssen became

the pioneer of Lutheran missionary work in the country at Zinga and thereafter at Kirinda in the same year, in the current Western Province. Unlike Catholic missionaries, Protestants had a good relationship with King Musinga and German colonial rulers. However, Protestants suffered a lot when Rwanda passed from the German rule to the Belgian mandate in 1916 as a result of Germany's defeat in the First World War. German missionaries were forced to leave the country. In 1919 some of their stations were taken over by the Belgian Mission society whose work birthed the current Presbyterian Church in Rwanda in 1967 (Rutaganda, 2000).

The period of post-independence Rwanda new leadership that inherited the divisionism from the colonialists and hence, this poor politics ended by the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and all its consequences. Due to the climate prevailing in Rwanda in the 1950s and poor Rwandan leadership of the after-independence, a part of Rwandans predominantly Tutsi fled the borders to the neighbouring countries including Tanzania. Most of the refugees, who were Protestants, were converted to be Lutherans when they arrived in Tanzania, especially in Karagwe (LCR, 2019:16). It is after they returned to Rwanda that they revived the Lutheran church.

The LCR began with only 500 members and from 1994 to 1998; the Lutheran Church in Rwanda had grown from 500 members to 6,394 as per the church records (LCR 2019). According to the church reports in three districts, currently the number of church members has declined. The reports further have shown that the Rusumo District has 2,901 church members, Umutara District has 1,338 church members and Kigali District has 1,320 church members,¹ this gives a total of 5,559 church members. Therefore, this data indicates that for the past 25 years the church membership has declined from 6,394 to 5,559.

Church growth is determined by the infrastructure and population. In the case of the LCR, both infrastructure and population have stagnated. There is deficiency also, in terms of income generating projects by the church that would ensure church growth. These factors coupled with other hidden challenges could be the reason for the church to stall.

2. Lutheran beliefs and teachings

Where there is no faithfulness in proclaiming Christ to the lost, there may be no church growth. That calls upon believers to leave their comfort zones, and become totally committed to a life of compassion to the lost. The compassion pushes the believers to go out in order to bring back those who have no place for God or those who have strayed away or drifted back from the faith. Once Christians find them, they venture into the ministry of feeding the flock, which eventually translates into church growth.

On the other hand, the moment Christians become apathetic and allow those who may have given their lives to Christ to drift back into the world, churches will not grow but will decline and fail to grow. The heart of God thinks about church growth. McGavran (1965) argues Church expansion does not begin with better methods or more money. His view is that Church growth is a continuation of redemption, in the heart of God from eternity, revealed in His Son. He further argues that this ministry was imparted by Christ to His disciples, energised by the Holy Spirit, and has been given to Christians today as both gift and command.

Lutherans believe that God is a triune being. The concept of God contains three separate, yet conjoined, spiritual beings that consist of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Fundamental beliefs of Lutherans consider the Bible to be divine scriptures that contain instructions for proper human conduct. Lutherans abide by the teachings of both the Old and New Testaments. The church baptizes new members and children in formal ceremonies that symbolize the forgiveness of sins and attainment of eternal life.

As the results of the survey for this paper indicates Lutheran teachings are well organized and very important for church growth.

Lutheran has two major books that use to teach their members, those are; Small and big Catechisms of Martin Luther and the second one is freedom of Christian. These are major resource that Lutheran have and you can't find in any other denominations, teaching Church members Catechism is to build a solid foundation in the members of the church.

One said that, I got time and read them through and discovers that, the way other think about Catechism is different, I found that Catechism is a summary of the Bible and he recommended that church members should take time and learn those books it will help them to be firm in faith. Said CR 20th June 2022

The views of interviewees are that Lutheran Church has many resources which are not utilised well. Church craggy seems has no time to teach their church members, and when teachings are ministered well church can grow.

2.1.Children's ministry

In many churches, the children's ministry includes "children's church," a time of singing, hearing a Bible lesson, and participating in activities geared for children. Usually, children's church takes place during the main church service. The children have their own room, their own curriculum, and their own teachers who know and love them.

The Bible contains no specific model for a children's church. However, the Bible is clear that everyone should be evangelised and taught the Scriptures. Sharing the gospel with children and teaching them the lessons of the Bible is surely a good thing. Some churches do this by offering a children's church, and others opt to keep the children in the "big people" service with their parents or a responsible adult. Most interviewees expressed their feelings with children; they said that the growth of the church and its sustainability depends on the children, when the children left behind it mean no future of the church. They emphasised that investing in children much more will help the church to continue existing.

2.2. Discipleship Program:

In Mathew 28:19-20 Bible says, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the father and of the son and of the holly sprit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely am with you always, to end of the age" (NIV). For that matter, the LCR is required to takes this instruction seriously by making sure it aligns with her programs that support the church to grow.

Interviewees mentioned that discipleship is the process of helping people grow in their faith and become more like Jesus. For them, a church that is committed to discipleship will see its members grow in their love for God and others, and this will lead to growth in the church as a whole. But it was a question to them why LCR has no discipleship program in respective parishes? It seems all of the respondents were eager to have such a program in church.

Measuring the growth of any church, one must consider Quantitative and Qualitative growth. Qualitative growth can only take place after quantitative growth. The reason is that the church can only disciple the converted people in their churches. Therefore, introducing new converts to churches provides the opportunity to develop quality in these members. Quantitative growth is the entrance-point to church growth which is destined to generate qualitative growth.

Through interview the researcher asked the respondents how discipleship is ministered in Lutheran Church of Rwanda, the findings were as follows:

In our respective parish we have never experienced the discipleship classes unless those who are preparing for confirmation and baptism, apart from that nothing else. The church can't grow when the church members are not disciplined. Said DR on 23rd July 2023

Pastor PF through focus group discussion expressed that:

Discipleship in the church is a very important task of the church. It is the heartbeat of God and a basic necessity for a successful Christian life. The scripture revealed that Jesus called the twelve disciples from the beginning of His ministry. He taught them within a period of three and a half years. After the training and before the ascension to heaven, He commanded them to go and make more disciples from all over the world. (Matthew 28:18-20). But to the case of Lutheran church is somehow deferent, discipleship is to train the members to go and make other to come to Christ, but to the situation of LCR pastors are not fully in parish due to the economic challenges that pastors are passing through.
24th July 2023

2.3. Stewardship failure

This may seem harsh, but as a society and as a Church, we have failed to help people embrace stewardship. It obviously does not work to just tell people they need to give. Unfortunately, far too many church leaders have failed to understand and adapt to the changing realities which are behind this decline in giving to the local church.

The researcher asked the Pastors in focus group discussion to explain How is stewardship contributing to the decline of church members?. They had the following to answer:

Pastor OG said that, Salvation is free, but ministry has a cost. The churches that were not growing had not set designated money aside for outreach or earmark any for witnessing in the community. When a church is busy or visible in the community,

people are attracted to ministries that are active. People now want to be part of active churches with groups, Sunday school, and other ministry opportunities. They want to participate in ministries with a clear-cut vision and direction. The case of Lutheran church is different due to economic situation, and has a root far from starting the church. You know on first time when the church were starting up, we did not thought how to depend on ourselves, rather we hoped to get sponsors. That is why even now to raise funds in church is not working due they are not trained in stewardship or ownership of the congregation.

One of the church members had the following to say:

We know what stewardship is, when we hear about stewardship what comes in our mind is money only, and for sure even when pastor talks about it, he mean money and we have to be open minded and know that stewardship is all about careering all creation include ourselves and all what we have. To me we are not yet thought how to be a good steward in everything. JB 23rd July 2023

The findings of this research show that the teachings of LCR have not reached the church members needs due to different factors as shown above. It found that the important ministries are left behind and that contributed a lot to her decline.

Tom Rainer identified seven primary methods and programs that contribute the most to effective assimilations, according to Dr. Darren W. Thomas, who cited Rainer in his book “The role, history and decline of Sunday school” he said “special events, weekday ministries, recreation activities, youth program, pre-school program, Sunday school program and children’s program”. He claimed that of all of these strategies and initiatives for shutting the back doors of the church and integrating newcomers into the community.

“In a survey conducted by the research, it was found that parishes today have only one service during the weekend. There a problem with the church due to the limited time spent together in worship and fellowship. There are Parishes that offer small groups instead of a worship service, but is the pastor truly having time to fellowship and make disciples with such a limited time? Could this be contributing to the disconnection that many Lutherans are having with the Church? The key to developing strong churches and disciples is found in the key of relationships. It is through the seven stages of making a disciple that Thompson teaches that discipleship takes place within a concentric circle of concern, which is built upon relationships” (Thompson, 1999). “It is hard to develop relationships within the church with limited exposure to other members and the pastor. The pastor of the church is the influential leader in the area of discipleship. Small groups, Bible studies, and other church related activities are great and do produce disciples”. (Thompson, 1999)

However, the relationship between the leader (pastor) and the congregation is hindered by limiting the time and exposure to each other. “Many churches have taken this approach to ministry because of size and convenience, but this very approach could be limiting the potential of the under-shepherd being a true disciple maker. This has caused a disconnection with the church. Many have become more connected to the small group rather than to the church. It is the author’s opinion that small groups are great for churches, if the leader of the small group is truly

prepared to lead the group. However, in many cases this time has become a time of fellowship more than anything else”. (Thompson, 1999)

3. Methods of evangelism

Christians have used many different approaches to spread Christianity via the practice of evangelism. Christianity began with only a few different evangelistic approaches, but over the years, many different forms of evangelism have been employed by various groups to spread their faith.

3.1. Door-to-door evangelism

“The Bible records that Jesus sent out his disciples to evangelise by visiting people’s homes in pairs of two believers (cf. Luke 10:1–12). In the same text, Jesus mentioned that few people were willing to evangelise, despite there being many people who would be receptive to his Gospel message” (Logan, 1957). As such, door-to-door preaching is an approach to evangelism where a Christian will go from household to household in a certain area to evangelise residents, often in conjunction with passing out gospel tracts.

This is one of the methods of evangelism that date back to the time of Jesus. When Jesus was sending out His disciples, He advised them to enter and stay in houses where they were welcomed. In houses where they were not welcomed, He advised them to shed off the dust of their feet and move on (Lk. 9:2-5).

When asked the importance if they know importance of door-to-door evangelism, in focus group they replied;

Door to door evangelism has a number of advantages but by far the most important one is the intimacy part of it. When someone goes to church, they will hear the message and may relate to it. But when the gospel comes to their door step, they feel honoured and it goes deep into their hearts. Said MB on 23rd July 2023

There is a lot more we can offer to people in door to door evangelism than other forms of evangelism. The people who receive salvation during a door to door evangelism, they become strong due they have interaction with evangelist who brought the good news to his/her home. Said MC on 23rd July 2023

Basing to the above findings show that the evangelism in Lutheran church is still challenge due to means of conducting gatherings like crusades and small meetings as well. Door to door evangelism is a great way to reach out to people with the gospel. But it comes with one huge challenge; getting the right people to do it. Evangelism on its own is not easy. Add to it the care that must be taken when going to someone’s house and it becomes even tougher.

3.2. Televangelism

“Televangelism is an approach to evangelism characterised by an evangelistic message presented through the medium of television, often through a charismatic sermon. Large Christian television networks such as the Catholic broadcasting channel EWTN or the Protestant televangelism channel Trinity Broadcasting Network feature many televangelist preachers. Televangelism was started in the United States and Canada in the mid-20th century, as a primarily evangelical Protestant approach to evangelism. It made Christian viewpoints much more visible in the world at the time than they were before” (Gibson, 2018).

Open-air preaching

“Open-air preaching is an approach to evangelism characterised by speaking in public places out in the open, generally to crowds of people at a time, using a message, sermon, or speech which spreads the gospel. Supporters of this approach note that both Jesus and many of the Old Testament prophets often preached about God in public places. It is one of the oldest approaches to evangelism” (Gibson, 2018)

“During Protestant Reformation, open-air preaching was often employed by Protestant throughout Europe who could not always preach inside churches, which were mostly Catholic. Open-air preaching in Europe continued during the rise of Puritanism and other Protestant movements. It was often used in Pastoral environments as well as in cities, the former sometimes due to a desire to avoid the authorities, and the latter because, for one reason, it could reach eccentric people living in cities who would not otherwise hear the gospel” (Muzorewa, 2005).

The respondents in focus group discussion when asked how the evangelism is conducted through open air Preaching or big meeting preaching, they responded as follows:

Our parish begun in 2000 but we haven't yet done such gathering even one day in this area and our church members are ever leaving the church every time especially younger ones and join the nearest Pentecost church. And the reason why they are ever going there is due to that evangelism that they are currying every time- NP 23rd July 2023

Another participant said:

We do not have an open-air preaching since we start what we know is Sunday preaching only. When asked why is not taking place in their parishes, they replayed; the open air preaching needs the many things to used, as music instrument and money you cannot have a such big meeting without enough music instruments. So that is why we don't even think about it (MZ).

When interviewed pastor MV about why are not conducting crusades and taking it seriously as a tool for church growth he said:

The crusades are very key point in evangelism and in church growth, but the problem is the economic problems as I stated earlier. Without money nothing can be done on the case of Lutheran church it is hard to conduct open air preaching due to its cost.

Pastor PF added that, though we are passing through hardship in terms of economic, but even we have no unity among ourselves, we are not supporting each other. And we need unity in church so the parishes which are neighbours can work together in organising such gathering. In addition to that our church members have no heart to invest in church activities and why even church are not in good condition.

“According to Rodger C. Basham, Biblical evangelism has the purpose of leading sinners to accept Christ as their own Saviour, preaching that Jesus is our only Saviour who died on the cross to forgive our sins and that we are to wait upon the Lord serving Him in our daily lives” (Rodger. 1980). This is a good definition of personal evangelism. Jesus said to his disciples, "you are witnesses of these things." (Luke 24:48) and "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends.

“Leighton Ford, an associate evangelist for many years with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, wrote a book on personal evangelism. He stresses that the Great Commission really says, "as you are going, make disciples." He says, "Faith sharing at its best comes from the overflow of a life shared with Jesus Christ and others on a day-by-day basis Sharing good news is a life-style patterned after God. It is a life of making friends for God, as God has made us His friends through His Son” (Leighton.1974)

“The greatest purpose of personal evangelism is to lead people to believe in Christ and to have a Christian life. The Great Commission of Jesus was not only getting born-again Christians but also making disciples. George E. Sweazay quoted Martin Luther, "The church whose members are leading Christian lives is a community worshipping Christ, not the church building, where people are taught and learn the Christian way of living” (George. 1981).“He said repentance is what people need before anything else, to be born again. Repentance makes a new person, turns him into a new creature, and brings him from death to life. It is the work of the Holy Spirit and the complete transformation of his character. Repentance is the ultimate goal of evangelism” (Martin. 1947).

“Paul's entire life was also thoroughly dedicated to making disciples (2 Timothy 2:2). McGavran agrees with this. He opines church growth is one of the objectives of evangelism that cannot be yielded but the ultimate purpose is, of course, making disciples” (McGavran. 1970). Robert Coleman (1980)also contended that what Jesus meant in saying "make disciples" was for His disciples to go and lead others to Christ and make them His disciples. “In this commission we are not just commanded to go to all nations or only baptize people or only teach them, but to make them His disciples like us. Summing up the purpose of personal evangelism, it is to preach the gospel to a nonbeliever, thus have him to repent and glorify God and eventually to make them disciples as in the Great Commission” (Math. 28:19-20).

It is not sufficient,however, that the Church should see only rather it must arise and do. It must get out much more than it has done. There is the necessity for extensive work as well as for intensive operations. Lutheran Church has to train laity and send them to do evangelism out

there. For visiting by laity is more effective for evangelistic purposes, due to then one he/she visits are sometime neighbours and know each other in many ways.

Remember the story of the guard who was watching over Paul and Silas when there was an earthquake and the doors of the prison opened. His life and that of his family were transformed. The experience was so personal that he could not resist but believe the gospel (Acts 16:31-34).

4. The main challenge

4.1. Pastors economic crisis

The pastors' economic crisis is the major key in declining the church country wide, in the case of LCR it big challenge due the pastors has no salary and some have no other activities that can generate income for the family welfare. When I was interviewing an Anglican Church member, he compared both denomination and was really incomparable. He said;

In our church (Anglican) we have 2,086 church members who attend Sunday service, and we have members who are working in different institutions and are easy tithing and contribute to other Church activities. Back to Lutheran Church, firstly they have few church members example neighbouring parish and is considered to be in three parishes that have big number in terms of members, they are between 150-180 and most are children. So basing on that it shows how the pastor's life is. When pastor's life and family is not stable it is hard to find results in the ministry. Most of them are my friends and I know the hardship they are passing through.

Another from ADEPR added that; Lutheran Church is a well organised Church even when you see the way the conduct church services it shows that are well designed. I have never attended Sunday service but I attended funeral services and weddings, surely they are not compared to other church especially Pentecostals. Secondly they have their own way of teaching the faith to the members; I like that one of Apostil's creed you find even young children can confess their faith in other words they know what they believe. Though they are stragglng economically but I can see future hope for Lutherans.

The findings above from respondents show that pastors' economic crisis has big impact on church decline and is affecting both spiritual and numerical as well. It is hard for clergy to minister while family is hungry, so it found that the cause of the LCR to stall is that all pastors and evangelists are depending on themselves.

4.2. Lack of unity

It is possible to speak about disunity and division as though they were a small thing, which would be a mistake. Making light of it is a mistake. Just listen to (John 13:34–35 NIV): “A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

That's a very convicting text lifelessness among Christians is not a light thing. The researcher had time with interviewees who are not Lutherans to share what they know about disunity in Lutheran church, they come up with the following:

I can see disunity in two terms; 1. Pastors are not cooperative in what they do. Example is that when they organise Gospel meeting the parish in same locality are not cooperative and help each other, every one works on his own. And church like this which needs to grow it could be better to work hand in hand with those parishes around. But that one I have never seen it in Lutheran Church and that is a big challenge I observed. 2. There are some indicators that LCR leaders are not united, A) to see five pastors leaving the church at all most the same time, it is a bit challenging and indicate disunity in top leaders. B) The lack of unity among pastors it is a consequence of top leaders, if the top leaders are united it can't happen to down ones. Pastors can misunderstand for each other but when it comes to work for the church they can join hand together and serve the church for better.

Another respondent added:

Not only leaders with disunity even monger church members there are many disunity and disrespect, and when Christians are not having same mind and direction it is hard to move on. I can give example, when you want to raise funds maybeyou want to build pastor's office, it is hard to achieve that when church members are in dispute.

The quotation above from interviewees indicate that lack of unity contribute much to the decline of the church. When the church Leaders, pastors and church members are not united it is impossible to get good results in the ministry.

4.3. Non gifted Pastors

Christ gives each of us grace, in the form of spiritual gifts, as he determines to apportion it (Eph. 4:7). These gracious gifts include various roles within the church; apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (verse 11). And what are these leaders supposed to do? They are to "prepare God's people for works of service" (verse 12). A more literal translation is "a work of ministry." In other words, the leaders of the church are to prepare the members for action in the work of the ministry of the gospel. But not everyone has been given the gift of preaching, any more than all parts of a body are mouths. Acts 6:2-4 describes two overall types of ministry in the work of the gospel: the ministry of tables, and the ministry of the Word. Giving physical nourishment through service and giving spiritual nourishment by preaching and teaching the gospel. Both kinds of ministry are essential to the church.

How should we then explain the theological concept of spiritual gifts? These gifts of grace from God are to be understood as the equipping and empowerment of the believing followers of Christ by the Holy Spirit, so that they can participate in building up the body of Christ. Spiritual gifts are capacities of believers to express and communicate the knowledge and power of Christ for the purpose of edifying the church (Packer 2005:145). Every believer in the body of Christ is 'empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as He wills'

(1 Cor. 12:11).

5. Conclusion

“Church Growth” is the discipline that seeks to analyse why Christian churches grow or decline, both numerically and spiritually. Numerical growth can include attendance at worship, membership and the number of congregations.

In most of time Lutheran pastors are working for themselves instead of serving the church with their heart, this is mainly hindering the church's growth. A pastor should be always minding flock and nurturing them but that time is not there to the economic problem that pastors are facing.

Lastly the researcher, basing on the results, proposed the strategies to quicken the LCR growth. Among the strategies proposed are the ‘Focusing on evangelism and discipleship, Being welcoming and inclusive community, providing relevant and engaging worship services, Offering relevant and helpful ministries, Being a church that is constantly learning and growing, providing incentives for the theologians, To update the evangelism contents, To empower the youth and women, To assure the pastors and lay people’s education, To establish infrastructure of education, health, economy like Micro-finance institutions.

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