

The Seventh-day Adventist Church and the quest for transformational development in contemporary Nigeria

Perspectives from an empirical study¹

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Abstract

This article discusses the findings of an empirical study that investigated the attitudes of different sections of the membership of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church to the socio-economic and political struggles in Nigeria. The study sought to explore how this denomination's theology and missional orientation have limited its role in the holistic development of Nigerians. The article argues that the proclamation of the SDA Church's unique message and its involvement in transformational development should not be mutually exclusive. There were three significant findings of the empirical research. First, although SDA members, clergy and church leadership thought the Church had a role to play in national development, there was a level of inhibition in their minds and actions. Second, SDA members, clergy and leadership upheld that involvement in national development should ultimately be for evangelisation purposes. Third, Nigerians who were not members of the SDA Church felt the SDA Church had not significantly impacted Nigerian society. Based on these findings, the article concludes by upholding the paradigm of transformational development as theological vision for the SDA Church becoming an actor of holistic development in Nigerian society.

Key words: Seventh-day Adventist Church, Nigeria, mission, transformational development, poverty

1. Introduction

Christians have traditionally construed mission to mean transmission of the gospel from one culture to another. The *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2010:187) de-

¹ This article draws from the first author's doctoral dissertation, "Church and transformational development: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and its missiological orientation in democratic Nigeria," completed at the University of South Africa in 2019. The thesis is available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/26009>.

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defines Christian mission as: "An organised effort for the propagation of the Christian faith." However, there has been an expansion of the understanding of the traditional Christian mission paradigm. Mission entails going beyond the evangelisation of the other. It includes every effort to restore the image of God in humanity regardless of location. Titus Presler (2010:195-196) observes that "mission is ministry in the dimension of difference." This difference may be socio-economic, theological or based on any other factor. Jesus calls the Christian Church to invite the world to move from where it is to where it ought to be. This is an invitation into God's kingdom. Jesus sends his followers to the world with the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit for this task (Matthew 20:19-20; John 14:16, 20:21-22). The attitudes of the SDA Church (in Nigeria) regarding social justice, advocacy and the transformational development of Nigeria are shaped by its understanding of the concept of mission.

The SDA Church is a global missionary institution that has its direct roots in the Millerite³ movement of the 1840s in the United States of America and the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. Several studies on the apocalyptic writings of the Bible led Millerites to conclude that Jesus' Second Coming would occur on 22 October 1844 (Schwarz, 1979:49-50).

Although the predicted Advent did not occur on the set date, a worldwide preaching of the Second Advent and the task of preparing the world for this event is nevertheless central to the splinter group that would emerge from the Millerites, namely; the SDA Church (Knight, 2004:39-40). SDAs' theology of mission is shaped by texts such as Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15, which are seen as creating the mandate to preach the gospel to the entire world. Christians often refer to this as the great "Gospel Commission" (Babalola, 2002:12). More specifically, the messages of the three angels described in Revelation 14:6-12 form their sense of mission. SDAs here receive the mandate to call all world cultures to worship the true creator, God. The texts also contain warnings to the world about the impending judgement of God on those who embrace false religions and worship. In Adventists' thought, false worship includes disregard for total and absolute adherence to the Decalogue (Alalade, 2008:23-25). The SDAs' mission in Nigeria is to fulfil this mandate.

The SDA Church invests significantly in charity as its strategy to alleviate human suffering, but it is ultimately geared towards evangelisation. Its understanding of eschatology engenders a sense of urgency in the proclamation of the personal gospel with little regard given to issues of development and social justice (Dabrowski,

³ This term describes those who followed the teaching on the imminent return of Christ as taught by William Miller, the man who was popularly known to have fixed the mid-1840s date for the Second Advent of Christ. Miller had a great influence on the religious atmosphere in North America during this period.

2010:225). Therefore, the SDA Church's prophetic influence on the socio-economic and political stage in Nigeria is minimal. This article presents the results of an empirical study undertaken to elicit the views of SDA members and officials, and members of the wider Nigerian public on the role and mission of the SDA Church concerning social justice and national development issues in contemporary Nigerian society. We start by offering the paradigm of transformational development as our theoretical framework for evaluating the role and mission of the SDA Church. After a brief outline of the methodology and description of the research sample, the discussion then offers a more pertinent presentation of the empirical findings in three separate sections. The final section leads the authors to uphold the transformational development framework as a theological vision for the SDA Church becoming an actor of holistic development in Nigerian society.

2. Transformational development framework

The background to this research is the divergent opinions about the role of religion, particularly Christianity, in the socio-economic and political life of a country such as Nigeria (Uchegbue, 2013:141). This is even more pertinent for SDAs because of the SDA Church's eschatology and focused mission.

Corruption and lack of discipline in implementing the country's development programmes have been a significant cause of Nigeria's present-day predicament (Ojo, 2012:454). Lawal and Oluwatoyin (2011:238) articulate the frustration caused by the current situation when they describe the Nigerian development experience as based on "the myth of growth and development".

Poverty is a result of the damaged relationships among people, not least between the poor and non-poor, and between God and humans (Myers, 2000:64; Myers, 2011:111-112, 143-144). If Nigeria is to break free from poverty and underdevelopment, the paradigm of transformational development has to be adopted as part of the country's developmental vision. Nigerian SDAs, for their part, need to develop a holistic development paradigm of mission or salvation (Kuhn, 2013:233; Agbiji & Swart, 2015:3-4). The goal of transformational development is to effect positive change in the whole of human life – materially, socially, psychologically, and spiritually (Myers, 2011:3). This is a different view from the traditional understanding of development that is measured by an exclusively macro-economic, physical and material yardstick. Transformational development is not a synonym for Westernisation or modernisation (Myers, 2011:3). It has to do with the restoration of humans in the image of God and the instilling of God's character and love in humans; such development impacts the relationships among humans. Humans need to be intentional about positive relationships based on God's intention (Myers, 2011:3-4). This involves restored relationships with God, with oneself, with others, with the

community, and with the environment/Creation (Myers, 2011:180-182). Again, in so far as the relationships between humans are involved, fundamentally at stake is what Myers refers to as overcoming “the primary transformational divide within a community of people who share a common history and culture”, namely, between the poor and non-poor (2011:182).

Myers’ understanding of transformational development, as also reflected in a similar understanding by others (see e.g. Offutt, 2012:42-43, 45-47; Reader, 2021; Samuel, 2015; Si, 2008; Sugden, 2003), is in full accordance with an understanding of mission as *Missio Dei*. Myers, in this respect, elaborates on the fact that transformational development emanates from a “convergence” of stories, which includes “the history of the community” and “the story of God at work in the community” (2011:137). From this vantage point, however, Myers stresses the importance of realising and accepting God’s story as “the larger, foundational story” of which all the “converging stories are a part” (2011:137). He continues to explain:

Transformational development takes place within the larger story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration . . . Professional development work can improve material, mental, and social life within the lifetime of the community members without changing the ultimate outcome of the bigger story. Only by accepting God’s salvation in Christ can people and the community redirect the trajectory of their story toward the kingdom of God. This is the bottom line of every community’s story, poor and non-poor. No Christian development practitioner can ignore this bottom line (2011:137-138).

From a transformational development perspective, to accept God’s story thus constitutes “the transformational point of maximum leverage for change” from which “many other good things will follow and become possible,” including, not in the least, restoration and flourishing of the various relational dimensions. Indeed, from a transformational development perspective, it is when this transformational dynamic unfolds that the outcomes will be “productive work, justice, sharing, embrace of the other, reconciliation and caring for creation” (Myers, 2000:65).

We close this section by asserting that the paradigm of transformational development has far-reaching implications for the SDA Church and its understanding of its role in contemporary Nigerian society. The limited impact that this Church has had on the community stems from a particular evangelical conception of mission. A recent contribution by Godfrey Harold (2019) is relevant in this regard. The thrust of his theological argument is that the understanding of the *Missio Dei*, when correctly promoted, “can contribute to building strong communities of faith, the transformation of communities and nations” (2019:1). In particular, he holds that this has not

happened because of a “soterian centred” (evangelism) focus among Evangelicals, which has created “a dysfunctional understanding of the Gospel and the *Missio Dei* that focuses only on a person’s spiritual condition” (2019:2).

Our contention is that Harold’s identification (problematization) of the soterian centred focus can also be applied to the Nigerian SDA Church. Moreover, for this Church, Harold’s further argumentation also becomes relevant when he writes that “(t)eaching of the *Missio Dei* with the inclusion of Social Justice enables one to develop a theology that is based on compassion and justice that sees active and practical compassion as an issue of faith in Christ (1 Cor. 12:26; Heb. 10:34) that is founded on the *Missio Dei*” (2019:2; see also Kemper, 2014; Soares, Lotter & Van der Merwe, 2017). We believe, in conclusion, that the paradigm of transformational development offers an important contribution to Harold’s theological correction, which we, therefore, will apply as our ultimate framework for analysis in this article.

3. Methodology and description of sample

A qualitative approach was adopted for the purpose of the research (Efuntade, 2019:8). The case study was carried out by studying “the background, current status, and environmental interaction of a given social unit” (Vyhmeister, 2001:143), namely; the SDA Church in Nigeria. In particular, an ethnographic research design was selected given its suitability for obtaining information from a community or a group of people and in the process generate in-depth descriptions of a small number of cases (Mouton, 2003:148-149). Ethnographic study involves collecting data by direct inquiry and observation; it includes the description of the culture or society being researched. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded in February 2018. The voice recordings were subsequently transcribed into a text format. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, five groups of interviewees were identified. The first category was the leadership of the SDA Church,⁴ specifically some officers of the Western Nigeria Union Conference (WNUC)⁵ and the respective leadership of the Adventist Women’s Ministry (AWM), Adventist Men’s Organization (AMO) and Adventist Youth Ministry (AYM) of the WNUC.

The second category consisted of eleven pastors from various Conferences within the Union, namely, Osun Conference, Ondo Conference, Oyo Conference, Lagos Atlantic Conference, and Ogun Conference of the SDA Church. The third category

⁴ To protect the identity of those interviewed, this article does not identify the particular positions those church leaders occupied.

⁵ The SDA Church operates through its administrative structures throughout the world. The highest units of the structure in Nigeria are called Unions. There are three of them; the WNUC is in charge of the western zone of Nigeria. It supervises the next unit in the structure called a Conference. Each state in western Nigeria is a Conference.

was the youth of the SDA Church, five of them from different Conferences within the Union. The youths interviewed were all undergraduates at tertiary institutions, except for one who had recently completed his law degree and at the time of the interviews was studying at the Nigerian Law School for his professional qualification in law. The young people interviewed were from different Conferences within the Union, namely; Osun Conference, Kwara Conference, Delta Conference, Lagos Mainland Conference, and Lagos Atlantic Conference. The fourth category consisted of five laymen and women from four Conferences of the Union: Lagos Atlantic Conference, Lagos Mainland Conference, Osun Conference, and Ogun Conference. This afforded the first author of this article the opportunity to become acquainted with the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of the SDA Church members on how their denomination, as a corporate entity, approached issues related to Nigeria's development. Furthermore, interviewing individuals on a personal level gave the interviewees the opportunity to express their personal thoughts on the subject, regardless of the behaviour of the Church as a corporate entity on the subject.

The fifth and last category consisted of ten members of the Nigerian general public. Members of the Nigerian public were interviewed to investigate their perceptions and knowledge of the SDA Church as well as their perception of this Church's impact on the development of Nigerian society. Thirty-two people in total were interviewed. The respondents' names are pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. Apart from the SDA pastors and lay leaders of AWM, AYM and AMO who were interviewed based on their leadership roles within the SDA Church, the convenient sampling approach was used to select other participants based on the ease of accessing them by the first author (Onuoha, 2020:111-112).

4. Perceptions on the identity and mission of the Church⁶

This part of the research aimed to acquire a deeper insight into how SDAs, both clergy and laity, understood the identity and mission of the SDA Church. The aim also included determining whether the perceptions of clergy or laity were different from the official position of the SDA Church – as contained in its doctrines, policies and other church publications – on these issues.

The interviews revealed Nigerian SDAs as having a well-defined and well-delineated identity and a sense of purpose very consistent with the official position of the SDA Church. All the SDAs, laity and clergy, gave very similar descriptions of who SDAs were and the SDA Church's mission in Nigeria. Most of the interviewees referred to the observance of the day of rest, the Seventh-day Sabbath being Sat-

⁶ The following discussion of empirical findings in Sections 3 to 5 draws directly from the text in Chapter 5 of the first author's doctoral thesis (Efuntade, 2019:123-160; see also footnote 1). Ethical clearance to undertake the empirical research was obtained from the University of South Africa.

urday, and the expectation of the second coming of Jesus Christ as central to their faith and identity. For example, a layman from the Ogun Conference, Mr Demejo Folio, responded as follows: “The mission of the church is the mission of Christians first of all, to evangelise the world, getting people ready for the second coming of Christ.” The Second Advent was thus seen as priority. This was confirmed by the leader of the Adventist Youth Ministry, who responded that the mission of the SDA Church was to proclaim the gospel, the Three Angels Message.⁷ A clergyman, Pastor Prosper Thank-God of the Ogun Conference, said:

SDAs are people that worship on the seventh day and also await the second coming of Christ. And this is our mission here. It is the truth about worshipping God on the right day, which is very important. We want to let people know what the Bible says about that. We also have this hope, this assurance that very soon our Lord Jesus will come to take us away from this sinful world.

The SDA interviewees also referred to themselves as a special group of people. For example, some of them used words and phrases like “special,” “unique,” “our message,” or “the truth” to describe Adventism. For example, one of the interviewees, Mr Fikao Oyewu, a young man from the SDA Church in Lagos, made the following comments:

The SDAs are a special set of people. We are special not only because we believe in the word of Christ, but also because we believe in the Second Coming (of Christ). We also believe that we are charged with the responsibility of letting others know that Jesus truly is coming.

Pastor Victor Olu of Ekiti Conference responded that the SDA Church had “a unique identity.” SDAs also claim some kind of ownership of “truth”. Dr Tunde Aloho, a layman in Lagos Mainland Conference, implied this when he talked about how members relate with other people in different denominations. He said, “it is only when we come close to them that they really know the truth.” Mr Sam Babs, a lay person and teacher at a university in Osun Conference, used similar expressions in the following statement: “They [people of other religious beliefs and denominations] came to know who we are, they came to identify with us, they were able to welcome our message, welcome us.” These statements are indicative of the sense of uniqueness (or exclusiveness) of the denomination in the mind of members.

⁷ The Three Angels Message is the phrase used by the SDA Church to summarise its mission to the world. It is based on the SDA Church’s interpretation of Revelation 14:6-12, where a number of apocalyptic angels give a series of messages to the world.

In addition to their beliefs in the seventh day, the Sabbath (Saturday), the belief in the Second Advent of Jesus Christ was so real to the interviewees to the point that the political, socio-economic and natural/environmental phenomena were interpreted within the framework and timeline of the Second Advent. For example, in response to the question of SDAs competing for political positions, Pastor Victor Olu of Ekiti Conference said: "I will not canvass Adventists being in active politics because many of the principles eventually negate our Biblical stand." The socio-economic and political landscapes of Nigeria were interpreted by SDAs in the light of eschatology. Poverty, social injustice, natural disasters, and other social challenges were understood as inevitable features of the time of Jesus Christ's Second Coming. Such interpretation clearly profoundly impacted the SDA Church's attitudes and approach to Nigeria's socio-economic and political development.

With respect to the mission of the SDA Church, all the interviewees, clergy and laity, anchored their understanding of their mission in the need to warn the world about the imminent Second Advent. Part of the preparation for this necessitated adhering to the Ten Commandments, with particular attention to honouring the Sabbath, the seventh day. As a further common denominator, all the interviewees also perceived that their sense of mission was rooted in the Bible, specifically the Three Angels' Message. SDAs' eschatology, therefore, relegated social engagement to the fringe. The task of the Church was to prepare the world for the Second Advent. Mr King Imopikin, a layman from the Ogun Conference, confirmed this view when he said:

Adventists are the people that are looking for the Second Coming of Christ ... Their mission is centred on Revelation 14 with the focus on the Three Angels' message that talks about taking the gospel to the whole world, all languages.

An interviewee already introduced, Mr Sam Babs, made statements similar to those of Mr Imopikin. He observed:

The SDA Church is a church that has the mission of preparing the world for the Second Coming of Christ. And we often anchor that mission on the Three Angels' Messages of Revelation that went forth to get people ready for the day of the Lord.

Lastly, a clergyman from the Lagos Atlantic Conference, Pastor Ogungbe, also made similar comments about the mission of the SDA Church:

The SDA Church is a group of people who have come together proclaiming the soon coming of Jesus, and they worship on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. Their mission is to propagate the gospel to reach the nook and cranny of Nigeria with the gospel of Christ Jesus.

These responses are indicative of what the priority is for SDAs, namely; the Second Advent and keeping of the Sabbath. By implication, it can be concluded that social engagement and the task of transformational development were not really of primary concern to them.

5. Evaluation of the SDA Church's mission

This section presents how SDAs – clergy and laity – viewed their Church with respect to accomplishing its mission. The interviewees' opinions on the level of success differed. For example, one lay member, Mrs Debby Wealthwake of Osun Conference, felt there was progress but with much still to do: "I am still believing that we are propagating it. We are to reach the unreachable and to touch the untouched area, and we are still on our mission." Yet another interviewee who had been introduced earlier, Mr Demejo Folio, gave the impression that the Church's task was overwhelming, especially when considering the small membership of the SDA Church relative to the country's population. To him, "the job" was "enormous".

Other interviewees, however, felt that the SDA Church had done pretty well. For example, Mr Imopikin pointed to the organisational development that could be witnessed in the Church, namely, educational institutions at various levels, branches across the country, the growth of youth groups, and the development of women's and men's ministries all over the country. Interviewees also pointed out that the SDA Church in Nigeria, through its educational institutions, developed Nigerian human resources that were even exported to other African countries. Mr Babs of Osun Conference and Dr Aloho of Lagos Mainland Conference also alluded to the Church's organisational development as a yardstick for measuring its success in mission. Dr Aloho thought that the SDA Church had done well by pointing to the fact that when he converted to the SDA Church, the administrative structures were not as sophisticated and developed as they have become. The development also included numerical and financial growth. At the same time, he acknowledged that the denomination could still do better. Mr Babs also thought that the SDA Church had done well in its mission. He expressed this view as follows:

In my opinion, I think the [SDA] Church has done a whole lot, and we need to be sincere in that regard. The Church has done a lot in evangelising the nation, Nigeria. We have branches scattered all across the nation, all over the states of the Federation. We have our institutions scattered across health institutions, educational institutions, all over Nigeria. So we have done a whole lot in that regard. But I will also be quick to say that the things that have been done have probably been done over the years, in the past. I am trying to say that maybe we are not making impactas much as we can now [at present].

Of the 11 pastors from various Conferences in the Union interviewed, ten felt that the SDA Church had not done well in fulfilling its mission in Nigeria. Although they all acknowledged that the SDA Church was achieving some success, for most of them, it still had a long way to go. For example, Pastor Ajobi from Lagos responded that although the SDA Church was on course, this was at a slow speed. He put it as follows:

I see the [SDA] Church [to be] on the right course, but the way at which we are doing it, or the speed is what needs to be worked on. The Church is trying, but . . . there is more and more to be done; many people are yet to even know [about] the Church, and what the Church stands for. That means the work is still enormous and more hands are needed.

Pastor Bella from Oyo Conference thought that the zeal for missionary work was dwindling. He believed that “spiritual laziness” was impacting negatively on the mission of the SDA Church. He blamed the dwindling zeal among members for the slow pace at which this Church was growing:

Actually, [the] zeal of early disciples can never be compared with the zeal we have today because factors around us today are not making things work out. Let me call it spiritual laziness that people do not have the force, the push like those days. So it is not as expected, though little move[s] have been made.

In summary, it appeared from the interviews that SDAs saw their mission as alerting the world about the Second Advent and letting people know about the sanctity of the Ten Commandments, which also requires the keeping of the seventh day, Saturday, the Sabbath, as the day of worship. Most of them felt that the SDA Church had not done enough in fulfilling this task. They acknowledged that this Church had grown since its arrival in Nigeria, both numerically and in terms of its organisational development, but that these dimensions of growth still fell short of what was desired. Issues of national development were clearly not a priority for clergy or laity.

6. SDA Church mission and Nigerian society

This section discusses the findings relevant to SDA members’ attitude to social justice, advocacy, and social engagement as mission and the SDA Church’s theological framework for thinking about economic suffering (of the masses of the country) and the role of the Church in addressing it. This is discussed in two parts, dealing with the socio-economic and political dimensions, respectively. In the last (third) part, this horizon is broadened to also discuss the perceptions of members of the wider Nigerian public of the SDA Church’s societal presence and involvement.

6.1 The SDA Church and socio-economic engagement

As far as Adventists are concerned, the missional focus of the Church is geared towards evangelisation and conversion to Seventh-day Adventism; therefore, impacting the socio-economic life of people is a means to an end, not the main objective. SDAs believe that before Jesus Christ preached to people, he often met their physical needs, including food and healing, to facilitate the preaching of the gospel. As Pastor Ogungbe of the Lagos Atlantic Conference noted:

The major mission of the Church, [the] Seventh-day Adventist Church, is to reach the people with [the] gospel; that is number one. That is the major reason it exists, to spread the news of Christ's coming, which will be very soon.

Mr Demeje Folio, one of the laymen interviewed, believed that a church needed to meet people's socio-economic needs in order to reach them with the gospel. "In any community, in every gathering, if you don't affect people socio-economically, you might not get to them." Mr Babs, the layman cited earlier, held a similar opinion when he responded that the health and educational institutions of the Church had to complement its mission. A leader of the AWM for the Western Nigerian Union Conference of the SDA, Mrs Vicky Golden, also saw the charity work of her ministry as a means of winning and retaining members. The ministry assists widows, poor women, and families. Those in need are prayed for and counselled by AWM. It also arranges outreaches to motherless babies, street children, and the destitute. She saw AWM as complementing the government's efforts in promoting the economic development of Nigerians. AWM also empowers women, teaching them skills such as baking, tie-and-dye cloth making, soap making, and other skills that can generate income for women. Mrs Golden said: "In the year 2017, we empowered over 200 people." This figure did not include the impact of AWM programmes implemented by hundreds of local churches.

Mrs Golden further pointed out that AWM extended their empowerment programmes to non-SDA members. Yet, at the same time, she also highlighted that the AWM discouraged SDA women from participating in empowerment programmes organised by other denominations to prevent SDA women from being converted to other denominations. AWM thus considered evangelisation as more important than the socio-economic activities.

The AMO was also involved in charitable activities that were directed at addressing the socio-economic difficulties of people, like their AWM counterpart. The charitable activities were likewise essentially a means of reaching people with the SDA message. At the time of the interviews, one of AMO's top officers at the Union level was Elder Musa Sodu, who made it clear that AMO's primary role was to assist the clergy in evangelism, preaching, and teaching the Word of God.

Elder Sodu further highlighted the fact that AMO teaches people about healthy lifestyles and simplicity of living. This means that the SDA Church shuns materialism. Hence it does not preach prosperity and does not advertise miracles like many other churches do. He alluded to the fact that the desire for riches and miracles were factors contributing to immorality and corruption in the country.

On his part, one of the leaders of the AYM, Pastor Ishaku Oyewole, believed that the AYM had a substantial socio-economic impact through its educational programmes for young people. From the perspective of the AYM, this was seen as an investment in the future of Nigeria, the youth being the future leaders of the country. Young people were also given leadership training to equip them for effective leadership in life. Pastor Oyewole believed that all this training and the lessons provided by the AYM were part of the SDA Church's contribution to the socio-economic development of the country.

Pastor Adey from Osun Conference affirmed the priority of evangelisation. He commented: "I am of the opinion that the SDA Church should do that, they should impact the socio-economic landscape of Nigeria and I feel that doing that can also impact the proclamation of the gospel and also encourage more people to embrace the teaching of the [SDA] Church." Another pastor, Joba Olade of Lagos Atlantic Conference, referred to the charity work of the SDA Church through the Adventist Relief and Development Agency (ADRA). He upheld as a case in point ADRA's efforts in digging boreholes to provide clean water in poor communities and support agricultural empowerment programmes and other charitable activities throughout the country, especially in the north-east of the country, where the insurgency by the terrorist group Boko Haram was ravaging Nigeria.

From the interviewees' responses, it thus appeared that the SDA Church was focused on charity-based activities and the empowerment of members as its approach to addressing socio-economic challenges. The SDA Church's proposed socio-economic palliative measures were narrow in perspective, mainly directed at its members. Its involvement in charity and economic empowerment initiatives was clearly a tool for evangelisation.

6.2 The SDA Church and governance

This section deals with the SDAs' views on issues of governance and social justice. Based on the SDAs' eschatology, the world will deteriorate morally and economically as Jesus Christ's Second Advent approaches (Matthew 24:6-8). In this respect, Pastor Prosper Thank-God commented:

Again, as a church, we believe that Jesus is our hope. There is no impact that anyone can make that can totally change the way things are going because we are

people of the Book; the Bible says towards the end at the coming of Jesus, so many things will not be working.

On the one hand, there were interviewees, clergy and laity, who appeared open to the SDA Church being the prophetic voice speaking truth to power, since only an organisation with a firm moral stance could do so fearlessly. They looked forward to the Church taking that position and lamented the absence of the SDA Church in this critical arena. For example, Pastor Joba Olade, who was introduced earlier, believed that: “(i)f we are keeping quiet when we are supposed to speak, it is dangerous.” Pastor Olade observed that it was the orientation of the SDA Church that limited its civil engagement. As such, he felt that the SDA Church had not played that role and hoped that it would start to do so as soon as possible. Another clergyman from the Lagos Mainland Conference, Pastor Oye Kola, lamented the docility of the SDA Church with regard to speaking out against injustice in society. According to him, this stood in contrast to clergymen like Bishop Matthew Kukah of the Catholic Church, who was very vocal on social justice issues.

In confirmation of the fact that the demand for the SDA Church to begin to challenge unfavourable government policies was on the rise, some of the SDAs interviewed insisted that their Church had been side-lined in many areas such as the electioneering process and access to tertiary education, because the denomination had not been publicly vocal on national issues, even on those that affected the denomination adversely. These two sectors, politics and education, give citizens access to power. Thus they were critical of the fact that elections for political office at all levels of governance in Nigeria were always held on Saturdays, the Sabbath day. Similarly, the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) examinations, the qualification examination for Nigerian universities and all tertiary education, were always held on Saturdays. These significant events were held on the Sabbath without any challenge from the denomination. Holding both the elections and the qualification examinations on Saturday, the Sabbath day, denied Nigerian SDAs access to power.

Interviewees supported the idea of SDA members seeking political office or seeking redress in courts of law as a means of having a voice in the public space in Nigeria. Pastor Ade Abbey, a clergy at Babcock University in Ogun Conference, believed that members should seek elected positions or support those who desired to do so in order to influence laws that had hitherto affected SDAs adversely. Others thought that Nigeria would continue to suffer under bad leadership if the country was run by those who were not morally upright. They claimed that only God-fearing people, of which SDAs were part, could provide good leadership for the country.

On the other hand, some interviewees strongly discouraged the involvement of SDAs, either as individuals or as a church, in politics. Some were very sceptical re-

garding the possibility of being involved in politics and still being a good SDA. They argued that the required principles for being ready for the Second Advent would be compromised if one were to engage in politics. Even those who thought SDAs could be involved in politics expressed concern about being a faithful SDA and a politician at the same time. This was, for instance, the position taken by Pastor Ogungbe of Lagos Atlantic Conference. According to him, the kingdom of God was not of this world and that getting involved in politics would be a distraction from accomplishing the mission of the SDA Church.

With respect to the Church making public comments on social issues, he believed that it could cause the government in power to misunderstand the Church as supporting opposition parties. Instead, he wanted to see that the leadership of the SDA Church meet privately with political leaders, but at the same time commented that it was noteworthy that no SDA Church leader had, to his knowledge, met with government officials over social concerns, either publicly or privately. Pastor Ogungbe advised the SDA Church and its people to instead pray for those in political offices.

In agreement with the school of thought that SDAs' involvement in politics should be limited, Pastor James Omoru of the Lagos Atlantic Conference also advised extreme caution about an SDA member being in politics. He believed that much of one's value system would be compromised in the process. He held that the Church should rather influence politics through the SDA Church's educational institutions. He expressed his thoughts in the following statement:

You see, if you want to be a politician in this country, you really have to sacrifice so much. In other words, some of your principles as a Christian would be sacrificed, or maybe the best word to use is 'will be compromised'. That is why it is difficult for Adventists to be involved in the political development of the nation.

A lay member already cited, Mr Imopikin, was very opposed to the idea of the SDA Church making public statements on politics or being critical of government policies. He described it as the Church acting like an opposition political party. Mr Imopikin insisted: "Instead of engaging the government verbally, they [SDAs] should engage the government in practical things, and that is practical Christianity." By that, he meant the Church had to complement the efforts of government by providing health care services, educational services and, more importantly, by living a good and healthy lifestyle.

The apolitical stance favoured above is consistent with that of the SDA Church as adopted in some of its documents. This position is expressed as follows: "The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a worldwide religious community and, as a matter

of principle, endeavours not to be involved in political issues” (Communication Department, General Conference of the SDA, 2010:71). According to this stipulation, the SDA Church should seek ways to alleviate suffering by meeting economic, physiological, social or political challenges through charitable activities planned and executed by its various departments (Communication Department, General Conference of the SDA, 2010:80). In addition, the SDA Church, through its Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (2002:1), affirms the fact that inconsistent alignment with biblical personalities, SDA Church members could, in their individual capacity, rise to positions of influence in government. It would also not discourage them from aspiring to elective civil leadership positions. The SDA Church canvasses for the protection of the religious rights of all citizens and fairness for all (Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2000:1; 2007:1).

One of the top leaders of the Western Nigerian Union Conference, Pastor (Dr) Lamikanra Oluwaseun, affirmed the need for the SDA Church to be vocal about Nigeria’s political and socio-economic conditions. He believed that the [SDA] Church had to make official comments about the nation’s state. He made comments in the printed media on national affairs, such as illegal inflation and manipulation of the 2017 appropriation budget, an accusation that he levelled against the National Assembly of Nigeria. He also made comments on issues of national elections that would take place in 2019 (*This Day*, 2016:1). He believed that SDAs had to be interested in how the country is governed and also contest elected positions. He emphasised, however, that anyone who wanted to be in politics should be ready to stand firm on their Christian principles, which would be tested in the process. He believed the SDA Church must not be confrontational in its contribution to the political development of Nigeria. Church and state must remain separate.

Pastor (Dr) Oluwaseun insisted that the Church’s role was to support the government (cf. Ogunde, 2016:1). In the press conference with *This Day* newspaper (2016:1), he requested government authorities to ensure that elections were not held on Saturdays (Sabbath days) any longer, as this would allow SDAs to vote and be voted for. Two significant things are implied in this statement: firstly, SDAs could seek social justice publicly, and secondly, SDAs’ desire to participate in the political process in Nigeria could be justified.

6.3 Perceptions of the Nigerian public about SDA mission and national development

It is necessary to give some background to this sub-section of the article by providing the historical context of the SDA mission in Lagos. It is important to do so because the research on public perceptions of this Church was conducted in Lagos. The SDA Church has been in Nigeria since 1914 (Babalola, 2002:3), but

the missionaries did not establish their mission in Lagos immediately and chose instead to retreat to the hinterland in Erunmu, Ibadan. The reason for this is not easily ascertainable. Much later on, the SDA Church in Lagos, according to Adejoke Oyewunmi (2018), started in Yaba, Lagos metropolis, in 1932. The new Church acquired property at 37 Queens Street to serve as the parsonage for its pastors, and part of the land was used as its Adventist Book Centre (ABC), where evangelistic literature was sold. In addition, it also purchased another property at 7 Faneye Street, not too far from the first property, in the same year. The newly-established Church used the new property as the place of worship for Wednesday and Sabbath day services. It also used the same property as an elementary school for the community's social development and, of course, as a platform for evangelism. The elementary school eventually moved to another property that the fledging SDA Church acquired at Abule Oja in 1957, a suburb of the metropolis close to Akoka. Pioneering work in Lagos was done by Pastor J. A. Adeoye, Pastor Caleb Adeogun, Pastor Henry (surname unknown) and an elderly pastor, Pastor E. O. Joseph. By 1956, a new SDA Church branch was established in Apapa, a wharf community. In addition, Pastor Henry was instrumental in establishing another SDA branch in Odunlami Street in Lagos in 1957 before it finally moved to a permanent church building in 5B Bee-croft Street on Lagos Island (Oyewunmi, 2018).

Since then, the SDA Church in Lagos has grown considerably, with many branches in different parts of Lagos. Administratively, apart from the Union headquarters located in Lagos, there are two SDA Conferences in Lagos: Lagos Atlantic Conference and Lagos Mainland Conference. The local congregations that fall administratively under Lagos Atlantic Conference are located in the local government areas of Ajeromi/Ifelodun, Amuwo-Odofin, Apapa, Badagry, Eti-osa, Ibeju Lekki, Isolo, Lagos Island, Mushin, Ojo, and Surulere. It has 22 branches and about 5 500 members (Lagos Atlantic Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2013:1). In comparison, Lagos Mainland Conference has about 37 branches and over 7 000 members spread across congregations in Ifako-Ijaye, Agege, Kosofe, and other local government areas (Lagos Mainland Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2013:1).

In light of this contextual background, the survey among the ten representatives of the non-SDA public (see Section 3 above) should be understood. According to the information released on the two Conferences cited above, the total population of the SDA Church in Lagos is less than 20 000. Lagos State has a population of up to 15 million people. This gives one an idea of the minimal impact of the SDA Church's mission in this state. Of the ten people interviewed, only five were aware of the SDA Church. Among these interviewees, three claimed to have known the denomination superficially. They knew that SDAs go to Church on Saturdays, unlike most Chris-

tians who go on Sundays. One of the interviewees was a former SDA. Although she saw herself more or less as a member of the SDA Church, she had not been going to Church for a few years. She was not asked why she had left the Church.

When the latter group of interviewees were asked whether they knew the message or the mission of the SDA Church, all of them said they did not know. Mr Ahkazim commented that he did not have any desire to learn about Christian missions as a Muslim. However, two interviewees, Mr Nibaba and Mr Adefemi, replied that they knew the SDA Church had hospitals and schools. They were aware of the Adventist hospital in Ile-Ife, Osun State, because both had received their education in schools in Ile-Ife. Mr Nibaba further explained that the SDA Church was better known in Ile-Ife and some parts of Oyo State because of their schools. Nine of the ten people interviewed knew that Babcock University was owned and run by the SDA Church. However, none of those interviewed indicated that they had any knowledge of ADRA. None of them could say anything about the mission of the SDA Church. The lack of knowledge of one of the interviewees, Ms Moyeen, was revealed when she advised the SDA Church to establish their headquarters in Lagos to feel their presence, even though the SDA Church's headquarters had been in Lagos for over five decades. She advised the SDA Church to publicise its activities so that people could know what its members believe and practise.

7. Concluding reflection: The SDA Church becoming a transformational development agency

As revealed by this research, the SDA Church should be concerned about the apparent limited visibility of its mission in Nigeria. The research highlights how the theology – especially eschatology – of the SDA faith community shapes their (limited) level of engagement with contemporary issues of Nigerian society. The mission of the SDA Church in Nigeria should be able to engage the country's socio-economic challenges head-on. With this in mind, we return to Presler's description of mission as "ministry in the dimension of difference". The SDA Church should proactively ensure that its eschatological narrative does not undermine its ability to minister to Nigeria's unique challenges or make a difference in people's lives. The denomination needs to expand its missional orientation beyond its evangelisation paradigm to that of transformational development. Myers (2011:3-4) emphasises that the essence of mission is the holistic development of humanity based on the restoration of the image of God (*Imago Dei*) in people. No part of human life or society should be neglected. The work of holistically enhancing the quality of life by the Church must be deliberate and purposeful (Sugden, 2003:73).

It follows that the mission of the SDA Church and its congregations should thus be to become a witness to and sign of the kingdom of God by adopting a vision of transformation that encompasses all the relational dimensions pri-

criticised by the transformational development concept (see Myers, 2011:76-78, 175-177, 180-183; Offutt, 2012:40-42, 45-47). The theology of the kingdom of God is critical to transformational development (Myers, 2011:138-140; cf. Harold, 2019:4-6; Reader, 2021:75; Samuel, 2015). It is the manifestation of all of God's ideals for the world. The kingdom of God is more than the community of Christians; it is beyond the literal nation of Israel. It is broader than the pursuit of social justice as the means of eradication of poverty. The kingdom of God has to do with God's influence in the world. This happens through individuals who have been transformed by Jesus Christ, who bring to bear such transformation on their community (Sendriks, 2017:2-4, 15-16; Harold, 2019:5; Reader, 2021:75-76). The SDA Church, as an agent of the kingdom of God, should therefore work with God and collaborate with other agencies to bring transformational development to their community. It has to do with the denomination becoming the metaphoric light and salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-14). The goal of the gospel reaches beyond personal salvation and development. It entails the transformation of society. Such transformation is at the heart of the Christian mission in all its practical manifestations (Jacobsen, 2001:11; Stetzer & Rainer, 2010:1). The transformation of Nigerian society requires more than personal salvation. It demands seeking social justice, peace, and advocacy in line with the relational emphasis of transformational development – not least from the perspective of the poor and disenfranchised in this society. The SDA Church, for example, can sponsor advocacy projects for the rights of persons living with a disability. The Church could also sponsor bills that promote better transparency in national budget implementation. The denomination can also collaborate with other denominations in empowering citizens on voting and elections matters. These are just a few examples among a plethora of more concrete possibilities.

The transformational development paradigm offers an opportunity for SDAs to contribute to the conversation on development; this is even more pertinently so in the Nigerian context where the effects of broken relationships are prevalent. The SDA denomination can draw on the transformational development framework as leverage for holistic development in Nigeria. As Myers (2011:3) argues, development (by implication also in Nigeria) is not inevitable; there must be an intentional effort to realise it. SDAs can be agents helping Nigerian society make new choices that will facilitate holistic development. Such decisions will redirect society on the path of recovery of its people's identity of being made in the image of God. This will entail that the country moves towards faithful, just, and equitable stewardship of its resources.

Evangelism should by implication, be seen as directly related to the vision of transformational development. The false separation of spiritual and material well-

being limits the potential of spiritual agencies such as the SDA Church to fulfil their God-given gospel mandate (cf. Myers, 2011:7). Becoming involved with people, communities, and their predicaments should be done not only as a tool for personal conversion. Instead, activities geared to the alleviation of human suffering should be seen as being consistent with Jesus Christ establishing the kingdom of God as he healed sufferers (Matthew 4:23-24; Acts 10:38). SDAs should therefore acquire and deploy skills that will eliminate the waste, inefficiencies, and abuses of processes that often plague faith-based organisations in their involvement with the marginalised, the poor, and the broken (Wallace, 2002:134-136).

Other denominations and faith-based organisations in Nigeria can serve as worthwhile examples for the SDA Church. Although the denomination has done extensive charity ministry through its AWM, AMO, AYM, and ADRA, a greater impact could be achieved if the SDA Church pursues social justice and advocacy. Examples of faith-based organisations, both Islamic and Christian, that have an impact through their work for social justice and advocacy are the Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Nigeria (FOMWAN) and the Justice, Development and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church (JDPC/CARITAS) (Olarinmoye, 2012:5). Many more such organisations are involved in advocacy, serving as voices for the poor and the marginalised, and in agitation for civil rights. The more such faith-based groups participate in collaborative developmental initiatives, the higher the impact they will have on Nigerian society.

Michael Taylor (2011:5) notes that religious organisations have been seeking to play significant roles in development over time in Nigeria, but the role needs to become more sophisticated to match contemporary socio-economic and political needs and to demonstrate to unwilling governments that such organisations are competent enough to be an authentic voice of the poor and the marginalised. As a component or sector of the larger society, along with other sectors such as the civil society formations, political parties, the private sector and labour unions, religious groups have the potential to be part of the formulation and execution of development policies.

The SDA Church is focused on evangelisation in Nigeria, proclaiming the gospel in the context of the Three Angels' message of Revelation 14:6-12. It believes that only the Advent could bring an end to the suffering of humanity. It works only to relieve the existing suffering, especially as a means of evangelisation. It is thus mainly known for charity-based activities through its various ministerial arms. These are laudable efforts, albeit with minimal outcomes in relation to the developmental deficiencies of the country. As a country, Nigeria could benefit from the energy and mobilising capacity of its entire religious population becoming channelled towards addressing structural injustice.

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