

# Challenges and Strategies for Effective Spiritual and Moral Leadership in Seventh-day Adventist -run schools in Bulawayo province, Zimbabwe

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**ABSTRACT:** A few research studies have explored the challenges that impact spiritual and moral leadership and the strategies that can be implemented for effective pedagogy and learning. The objective of this study was to glean some insights into the challenges that impact spiritual and moral leadership in Seventh-day Adventists (SDA) and the strategies that can be implemented to resolve this. We used a qualitative interpretive research design to investigate the challenges of spiritual and moral leadership in SDA-run schools and the strategies that can be implemented for effective pedagogy and learning. Participants for this study were purposively sampled, and the data was gathered through semi-structured interviews transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Twenty (20) administrators from four SDA-run schools were purposefully chosen for the study. The study findings indicated that contestations exist between church and government workers employed at the SDA-run schools over remuneration issues that compromise the unity of purpose that should characterize SDA-run schools. Additionally, there is no clear memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the government and the church concerning the administration of the schools resulting in a tussle for roles and responsibilities. Lastly, the study revealed the ineffectiveness of the school administration as some of the key school board members were detached from the schools and showed apathy in matters involving the conflict between the state and church policies. Strategies for the development of effective spiritual and moral school leadership were suggested which include the privatization of the church schools, the establishment of a church-run teacher training college, and the continued spiritual and moral leadership development of staff members.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Strategies, Seventh-day Adventist; Spiritual and Moral leadership, Effective Pedagogy.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, the vice of spiritual decline in faith-based institutions often manifests itself in forms such as financial and moral scandals and this has negatively school administration, including those run and administered by the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church (Zheng and Jiang 2022, Prabhu and Mehta 2023, Subhaktiyasa et al 2023, Trull and Carter 2004). The exponential growth of the SDA church coupled with other factors such as secularisation and modernisation pose a plethora of challenges regarding the day-to-day governance and administration of such a countrywide educational system such as the rise in immorality. Such conduct is at variance with the broad portfolio of principles and ideals of SDA education which seeks to inculcate moral and ethical values, holiness, strong moral values, and academic excellence within its education systems in preparation for lifelong learning (Bailey 2018, Plaatjes 2014). Scholarly evidence notes that spiritual and moral leadership has the potential to contribute to the school's effectiveness when embraced as a leadership approach (Easley 2007). Therefore, this research sought to investigate the challenges that affect spiritual and moral leadership in SDA schools and strategies that can be implemented for effective spiritual and moral leadership.

A few research studies have examined the potential of spiritual and moral leadership in addressing leadership challenges confronting SDA-run schools. (Gibson 2011). The outcomes of the study reveal that spirituality and morality inform the professional practices of educational leadership. Additionally, Zaharris *et al.*, (2017:81-94) have also studied spiritual leadership and exemplary school leadership. The findings of the study indicated that spiritual leaders are also exemplary leaders and that exemplary leadership is a result of spiritual attributes such as vision, and altruism among others.

Despite the evidence of the importance of spiritual and moral leadership in the administration of schools, the challenges that impact spiritual and moral leadership in SDA-run schools remain neglected as an area of study. The objective of this study was to examine the challenges that affect spiritual and moral leadership in SDA-run schools and the strategies that can be implemented for dealing with these. The overarching questions guiding this study were: What are the challenges that affect the practice of spiritual and moral leadership? What strategies can be implemented to ensure spiritual and moral leadership in SDA-run schools? We envisaged that the findings from this research are central in informing scholars and education practitioners regarding the actions that they can take to enhance spiritual and moral leadership in faith-based schools.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A few research studies on spiritual and moral leadership in education from a practical theology<sup>1</sup> perspective (Isalano, Dimba, and Shibwabo 2021, O'Brien 2019, Hermawan 2021). Specifically, there are limited studies that have explored the challenges and strategies for effective spiritual and moral leadership within the SDA church. Woods (2007:135) points out that few scholarly studies have been done that discuss in detail the centrality of spirituality and morality to school leadership. Therefore, this research explored a problem that confronts the SDA church as it administers its educational institutions in Zimbabwe.

The focus of this study was to examine the challenges that impact spiritual and moral leadership in SDA-run schools and strategies that can be implemented to address these challenges. The central questions guiding this study were: What are the challenges impacting the practice of spiritual and moral leadership? What are the strategies that can be implemented for effective spiritual and moral leadership within the SDA educational system in Zimbabwe? The study gave helpful insights to the church on the challenges that were faced by school leaders in the day-to-day administration of the schools and the practice of spiritual and moral school leadership. The findings from this research were of assistance to the church regarding the policies to be formulated and implemented to enhance spiritual and moral leadership in educational institutions.

### Brief Context: Moral and spiritual decline in faith-based institutions

Spiritual and moral leadership have been acknowledged as an effective model for school leadership as it equips leaders with administrative and entrepreneurial skills as well as good behavior thus contributing to the school's success (Bafadal *et al.*, 2021). Unfortunately, religious-based educational institutions, including SDA-run schools, have been subject to spiritual and moral decline (Zheng and Jiang 2022, Prabhu and Mehta 2023, Subhaktiyasa *et al.* 2023, Trull and Carter 2004). Newspaper reports confirm that some of the institutions in Zimbabwe are now characterized by incidences of spiritual decline, and immorality among administrators, staff members, and students such as misappropriation of funds, poor student achievement, brain drain; poor infrastructure, and some levels of litigation. An article in *The Chronicle*, (2014) stated that a sex scandal reportedly rocked an SDA-run university where a foreign lecturer was allegedly caught by his wife having sexual relations with a student in their bedroom.

The above challenges were attributed to the lack of spiritual and moral leadership in schools. The failure to address spiritual and moral decline can result in maladministration and the collapse of SDA-run schools through ways such as poor service delivery, reduction of student enrolment, bad publicity, and leading to the tarnishing of the church's religious education mission to the community. SDA-run schools are centered on a bible based philosophy as articulated by Ellen. G. White is a worldwide educational system whose educational philosophy is the holistic development of learners for a life of service in this world and in the world to come (Bailey 2018). In the past, SDA schools were characterized by spirituality, good moral values, and excellence in terms of student achievement. However, the influence of modernization and secularisation have eroded these values in most SDA-run schools. The degeneration of spiritual and moral standards in SDA-run schools called for deep and comprehensive research into the underlying causes of such a development.

### Research Plan

The research problem in this study aims to tackle the lack of information on challenges impacting the practice of spiritual and moral leadership and the strategies that can be implemented for effective spiritual and moral leadership in SDA schooling institutions. This was achieved by investigating the following aspects

- The Challenges that Impact Spiritual and Moral Leadership in SDA run schools
- The strategies that can be implemented for effective spiritual and moral leadership in SDA-run schools

We performed semi-structured interviews with 16 school administrators to gain a comprehensive understanding of spiritual and moral leadership in SDA-run schools by asking the 'how' and 'why' questions (Wiesner, 2022). All interviews were recorded with the participant's consent, and transcribed and themes were identified from the data. Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to offer a detailed and insightful account of data (Nowell *et al.*, 2017; Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). For practical reasons, the sample was selected from SDA-run schools located in the province of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. We employed purposive sampling to ascertain the count of schools involved in the research Within Bulawayo province, there were 7 Adventist institutions, comprising 2 high schools and 5 primary schools. The study was carried out in 2 primary

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<sup>1</sup>Practical theology refers to a thoughtful, bible-based reflection on the activities of the church in relation to the practices of the society with the goal of safeguarding and empowering authentic involvement in God's redeeming works for their entire human race.

schools and 2 high schools. The sampling rates were 40% for the primary schools and 100% for the secondary schools. Additionally, a purposive sample of information-rich participants was chosen, including 4 primary school headmasters, 4 deputy heads, 4 senior teachers, 4 chaplains, and 4 accountants giving a total of 20 participants (Ames, Glenton, and Lewin 2019).

We believed that choosing participants actively engaged in different aspects of school administration in various roles and capacities could offer a more comprehensive view of the leadership values and practices upheld in SDA-run schools. The sample size used in this study was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, where no new information or themes emerged from the interviews (Boddy, 2016, Guest, Namey, and Chen 2020, Saunders et al. 2018). The qualitative data from interviews was transcribed and analyzed using the six steps of thematic analysis: familiarisation, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. (Nowell et al., 2017; Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Due to pragmatic considerations, the sample was selected from SDA-run schools located in the province of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. The researchers considered and attended to the following critical ethical issues while undertaking this research work: informed consent, anonymity/confidentiality, management of information, storing of data, and disposing of records.

The limitations of the research approach used in this study were that it was primarily focused only on the SDA church belief system and philosophy of education. Subjective qualitative data only was collected for this study. Although the SDA church operates more than one hundred and fifty educational institutions in Zimbabwe, this study was limited to four purposively sampled schools in Bulawayo province. Future studies may be conducted in more provinces, to collect objective statistical data, covering schools managed by other Christian denominations.

### **Presentation of Results and Interpretation**

The primary inquiry driving this study was: “What are the challenges that impact the practice of spiritual and moral leadership? What are the strategies that should be implemented for effective spiritual and moral leadership within the SDA-run schools in Zimbabwe? “. We mentioned that while analyzing the data, distinct patterns emerged, leading to the categorization of information based on themes identified in the semi-structured interviews. To address this aim, the researcher requested participants to delineate the challenges that they encounter in the practice of spiritual and moral leadership and the strategies that can be used to address them. Consequently, the following sub-themes surfaced from the stated objective:

#### **CHALLENGES IMPACTING SPIRITUAL AND MORAL LEADERSHIP**

##### **CONTESTATIONS BETWEEN CHURCH AND GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES**

Most participants noted that the conflict between church and government-paid employees affected spiritual and moral leadership in SDA-run schools. Concerning the conflict among employees the participants said:

*“In our schools, there is a conflict between the church paid and the government-paid teachers who are both employed at the school.” (P1)*

*“There is conflict in the schools because we have two different employees and there are conflicts with regards to salaries and benefits.” (P3)*

*“The relationship is bad, its toxic, the bone of contention is money.” (P13)*

*“There is a need for balancing up the remuneration between church paid and the government paid teachers because there is disparity some earn more than others and that creates big problems.” (P3)*

From the responses, it emerged that there is tension between church workers and government workers serving in the same SDA-run schools that have negatively impacted the unity of purpose and a sense of community that should characterize Christian faith-based educational institutions. Therefore, the school leaders have to inculcate and foster unity of purpose among school employees in the schools. Sharma (2018) also notes that the key attributes of moral leadership include unity and respect, among other qualities.

##### **GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF CHURCH-RUN SCHOOLS**

Further, most participants noted that some government regulations negatively impacted the practice of spiritual and moral leadership in Christian-based schools. Concerning the impact of government regulations on school administration, some participants said:

*“There is no clear memorandum of understanding between the government and the church with regards to the day-to-day administration of the schools”. (P1)*

*“There are two responsible authorities in the school that is the government and the church, and this creates conflicts for example in instilling discipline among learners and staff.” (P8)*

*“There is a conflict between the government and church policies, for example, the sporting activities during weekends.” (P7)*

*“Staffing is a challenge when it comes to the recruitment of teachers, the government may deploy teachers who are alcoholic.” (P4)*

Based on the foregoing discussion, it emerged that there is a lack of clarity regarding several policy issues. Bipath (2012) contends that one of the most understated ways in which organizational culture is entrenched and preserved is the procedure of choosing and appointing new employees. As such, a clear memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the church and the government is crucial and urgent in enhancing the spiritual and moral tone of the schools and their leadership.

### **INEFFECTIVE SCHOOL GOVERNING BOARDS**

The participants also indicated that the ineffectiveness of the school boards harms the practice of spiritual and moral leadership. Concerning the ineffectiveness of the boards in providing oversight in the administration of the schools, the participants said:

*“The school board as the responsible authority is an absentee landlord, we don’t hear the voice of the church in the school, but we hear the voice of the government.” (P6)*

*“The church shows cowardice, it is the school governing authority, but it is not that visible, and we are detached from our leaders.” (P3)*

*“The school board must assume its responsibilities because currently, we are not pushing together as a team.” (P10)*

*“The church over delegates all the authority to the school head and that’s a loophole.” (P15)*

From the research findings, it was evident that school governing boards are struggling to discharge their duties efficiently. The findings are in harmony with the finding of the research that was conducted by Plaatjes (2014:105) in South Africa that school board members in SDA-run schools were failing to discharge their mandated duties successfully because they were not adequately trained with administration and entrepreneurial skills to execute their roles as leaders and managers. Furthermore, another study on the roles of school governing bodies by King (2020:79) established that the way that the school boards operate and discharge their functions has an impact on the success and the failure of educational institutions. Therefore, new members who constitute the school board need to be inducted before they assume their duties.

### **STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE SPIRITUAL AND MORAL LEADERSHIP**

We explored the participants’ perspectives regarding the strategies and recommendations that may be proposed to develop effective spiritual and moral school leadership in SDA-run schools. The following subthemes emerged from the research participants’ responses: the privatization of the church schools, the establishment of a church-run teacher training college, and the continued spiritual and moral leadership development of staff members.

#### **PRIVATIZATION OF SDA RUN SCHOOLS**

The participants highlighted the privatization of schools as a key element in enhancing spiritual and moral school leadership. Regarding privatization, the participants said:

*“One of the key things is the privatization of the schools.” P4 exclaimed “I wish the church would privatize the schools.” (P1)*

*“I believe privatizing will bring a lot of benefits, for example, vetting of human resource.” (P7)*

*“Make the schools SDA schools in terms of administration because currently the government is calling shorts.” (P13)*

The research findings seem to suggest that the privatization of the schools is crucial and urgent if the schools are to survive and make a positive impact in the community through the provision of quality Christian education.

### **ESTABLISHMENT OF A COLLEGE OF EDUCATION**

The participants highlighted the necessity of establishing a church-sponsored college of education for training its educators and education administrators.

*“The church should come up with a teacher training college because currently most of the teachers were trained in secular institutions that is why the majority of the educators and leaders do not appreciate the Adventist philosophy of education.” (P5)*

*“The teachers should be trained SDA tertiary institution.” (P 15)*

*“As a church, we should not depend on the government for the training, recruitment, and deployment of teachers as if we are a small organization.” (P 13)*

The research findings concur with results obtained from a study conducted in 2017 on leadership development in SDA-run schools in Zambia by Ng’andu. Ng’andu (2017:27) concluded that there is no information about leadership development in



SDA schools. From the participants' responses, it was clear that the establishment of a church-sponsored college can be the center for the development of effective spiritual and moral school leaders.

#### **SPIRITUAL AND MORAL LEADERSHIP TRAINING**

The participants indicated the dire need for continued spiritual and moral leadership development programs for educational leaders.

*"The schools should consistently follow up its leaders with regards to spiritual and moral leadership."* (P3)

*"There should be intentional staff training and seminars on spiritual and moral leadership."* (P8).

*"The teachers and school administrators need to be trained; we have several teachers who were trained in secular institutions who need to be trained so that our values as church may be upheld."* (P15)

*"We must look at our professional growth and come up with best ways of improving ourselves."* (P11)

Based on these research findings, it emerged that without an intentional spiritual and moral leadership development and succession plan there will be a serious leadership crisis in church-sponsored schools. Thomas (2019:19) defines succession planning as a consistent, intentional, and methodological procedure by which entities equip several people with capabilities, skills, and exposure for them to occupy certain crucial responsibilities in the organization. When the researchers were examining the biographical and academic information of the participants, we noted that out of the fifteen participants, only four participants had leadership and administration academic qualifications.

A study on leadership development and mentoring in the SDA church by Bonde (2019:11) notes that leadership has a lot to do with developing and equipping others and that tomorrow's leadership is largely dependent on what is being done by today's leaders. Furthermore, Kobola (2020) contends that a successful educational institution equips its staff members in their numerous professional lines to ensure that each of them possesses the needed skills and expertise to discharge his or her responsibilities and they are constantly kept abreast with technological advances. The findings from the research suggest that the church should be deliberate in developing the current and future school leaders. The following section presents the concluding remarks for this article.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it can be noted that this study examined the challenges that impact spiritual and moral leadership and the strategies that can be implemented to address them. The study findings indicated that contestations and tussles exist between church and government workers who are both employed at the school which compromises the unity of purpose that should characterize DA-run schools. Additionally, there is no clear memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the government and the church concerning the administration of the schools resulting in a tussle and contestation for roles and responsibilities. Lastly, the study revealed the ineffectiveness of the school administration as some of the key school board members were detached from the schools and showed apathy in matters involving the conflict between the state and church policies. Strategies for the development of effective spiritual and moral school leadership were suggested which include the privatization of the church schools, the establishment of a church-run teacher training college, and the continued spiritual and moral leadership development of staff members. The adoption and implementation of the proposed strategies and recommendations will go a long way in improving the quality of service delivery in the educational institutions for the purpose for which the schools were established.

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