

## The Benefits and Challenges of Weekly Devotion Program: A Case Study of Sodo New Life Church

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### **Abstract**

*This study describes the benefit and challenges of weekly zonal devotion program of Sodo New Life Church (SNLC). It is one of the Church's core spiritual ministries held at four corners of the church direction to conduct regular devotion programs. The foundation of zonal devotion groups, the benefits and challenges of attending the group, members' insight about the necessity of the program, and church leader's support for the success of the program are the essence of this study.*

*Additionally, the study also focuses on the description of the program, benefits of the zonal devotion program, challenges of the zonal devotion program, and participant suggestions for improvement. For this study, different ideas were gathered from the literature review to compare and contrast the ideas in relation to the topic. For data investigation, a case study of qualitative research methodology was utilized through using interviews and survey questions from relevant respondents. At the end, the collected data were analyzed and summarized based on the findings to describe the benefit and challenges of the zonal devotion program.*

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**Key words:** *Benefits and Challenges; Devotion, Life church; Program, Sodo, Ethiopia*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Since we are the followers of God, the Word of God was given to us, it is nourishment for us. "If you explain this to the brothers and sisters, you will be doing your duty as a worthy servant of the Christ Jesus, one who is fed by the message of faith and the true teaching you have followed," (1 Tim 4:6). The Word of God is provided to us to eat and then to speak to others. God told Ezekiel, "Open your mouth and eat what I give you." Then I looked and saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe. And He said to me, "'Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel'", (Ezekiel, 2:8-10, 3:1-2).

As the Word of God is described by Peter, we are ordered to crave the pure spiritual milk like newborn babies, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good", (1Peter, 2: 2-3). We need to crave so that we may grow up in our salvation.

God puts His Word in our mouth to appoint us over nations to accomplish certain things, "Now; I have put My Words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, and to build and to plant," (Jeremiah, 1: 9-10). This indicates the relationship between Jeremiah and the Lord. In this, Jeremiah is told to guard against bad things and to build and encourage the right ones in his leadership (recommended to remove unnecessary situations and grow up the important ones). Likewise, as a leader, we have to

contradict the conditions that oppose God's way and need to stimulate the truth and lead people in the right direction.

When studying the Scripture there is not one set way that everyone has to follow rather one can study using the method he prefers,

As you prepare to study your Bible, realize that there is no "right" way to do it. You should prepare your heart and determine what your overall objective is going to be for the study session. But the helpful method one can use is: Begin with prayer, read slowly and take brief notes, look for the true meaning of the passage you are reading, keep a spiritual diary, memorize passages of the Word of God, and obey the Word of God. (Buckmire, 2005, p. 12).

Although facilitating Bible study is one of the activities of the church, preaching and teaching of the Word also should be the major role of the church. The Biblical truth tells us the church has to preach Biblical doctrine and truth to the parents, families, and children.

"The Church preaches Biblical doctrine and truth, which forms the theological foundation of the school and the family. They give confidence and direct parents from Scripture to take up their Biblical responsibility to educate and raise their children in the fear of the Lord", (Itulua, 2013, p. 79).

This indicates that the church has a mandate to teach the Word of God to its members. In addition to this, the church needs to keep members from false teachings, follow-up and support advice by a home to a home visit, and pray for their spiritual growth as well. As the study traces the leadership situation of the church administration and zonal group leaders regarding the zonal devotion program, leadership theory and group leadership ideas were designated under the following description.

### **Leadership Theory**

As Landis (2014) suggested, "If a theory of leadership is to be used for diagnosis, training, and development, it must be theory- grounded in the concepts and assumptions that are acceptable to and used by managers, officials, and emergent leaders" (p.2). In the historical context of leadership theory, Hernandez (2011) has acknowledged, there are eight categorizations of leadership theories such as trait theories, behavioral theories, contingency theories, social exchange perspective, venturing into new leadership perspectives, transformational and charismatic leadership theories, contemporary leadership theories, and emerging leadership theories. One of the most relevant leadership theories in this particular study is servant leadership.

### **Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership is serving others rather than self and understanding the leader as a servant. As Greenleaf (1977) suggested, "The focus of servant leadership is on others rather than self and on understanding the role of the leader as a servant", (p.3). Servant leadership is bringing out the best to the followers and relies on communication to understand the individual's desires to achieve their potential, as Liden (2008) stated.

Servant leadership is based on the premise that to bring out the best in their followers, leaders rely on one-on-one communication to understand the abilities, needs, desires, goals, and potential of

those individuals. With the knowledge of each follower's unique characteristics and interests, leaders then assist followers in achieving their potential. (p. 3).

A servant leader first begin with the natural feeling that he wants to serve, as Spears (2005) pointed out: "The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve", (p. 1). If a leader wants to be a servant for God and to his followers, he needs to be passionate by the purpose of servant hood (Gorman 2002). "If we are devoted to becoming servants of the Lord God and thus of his people, what we do will be affected by that purpose", (Gorman, p. 207).

### **Transformational Leadership**

When the term transformation is defined in the dictionary, it is the act of transforming or the state of being transformed or is a marked change (Merriam Webster). So leaders have to be changed in order to change other. As noted in Gorman (2002).

For the most part, people initially resist change because it means leaving what is comfortable and moving to the unknown. But there is no forward motion without change. The Christian life is expected to be one of transition and transformation as believers are continually formed more wholly in the likeness of Christ. (p. 93)

Bass (1985) explained, "transformational leaders motivate followers to achieve performance beyond expectations by transforming followers' attitudes, beliefs, and values as opposed to simply gaining compliance", (p.3).

Transformational leadership as Sarros (2008) mentioned, has been shown to support and promote innovation, which in turn can ensure the long-term survival of an organization. The key terms in transformational leadership theory are organizational culture and innovation which are a mediator of the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational innovation- any new product, process, or system in an organization (Sarros, 2008). Transformational leadership is often utilized in church settings as creating influence and motivates the behavior of members for positive impact in the church.

Therefore, these two leadership styles, servant leadership and transformational leadership are essential leadership practices the individual leaders have to exercise in their leadership position.

### **Group Theory**

Saim (2015) noted that the group can be defined, ". . . for two or more individuals who come together and interact with each other in order to accomplish a certain goal", (p.3). Additionally, "the creation of group arises from the perception which the individuals feel as the members of a group" (Saim, 2015, p.3). In this concept, a group of people are those who share a common purpose and feel connected to each other. In addition, as Sandelands (1993) mentioned, "Groups are said to be perceived according to the presence of one or more shared characteristics of members, such as race or gender", (p.5).

The group or organization must have its definite structure, mission, roles, responsibilities, and vision in order to have relationships and patterns for the success of the group. As Simon (1999) suggested,

Being clear about your group's organizational structure, roles, responsibilities, mission, and goals can make a big difference in how successful your group is. Organizational structure means the pattern of relationships within the group. It may include hierarchy (who's in charge) and roles and responsibilities (who does what), but it also incorporates people's attitudes and perceptions, the quality of what is produced, the way decisions are made, and hundreds of other factors. (p. 1).

The leaders should not exercise power over their followers but rather set an example with their lives. Because authority is God's alone as Gorman (2002) wrote, "But over-seers are shepherd, not lording over but setting examples with their lives. If there is any power resident in what Jesus is calling his followers to exercise, it is servant power", (p.207).

The interrelationship is very essential for co-working in a group. Creating a good network among members of a group increases mutual understanding and creates common sense in accomplishment. "Within organizations, both formal and informal social networks are important elements of an employee's work relationships", (Reich, 2011, p. 17). Relation within a group promotes a sense of social identity, improves self-confidence as well as improves work-related outcomes for those who are well-connected (Reich, 2011).

For groups to be successful, they must work together. Collaboration is the "mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve a problem together and collaborative interactions are characterized by shared goals, symmetry of the structure, and a high degree of negotiation, interactivity, and interdependence", (Lai, 2011, p.3). Collaboration is also a shared knowledge that supports problem-solving by integrating goals, descriptions of the current problem state, and awareness of potential strategies (Lai, 2011).

In group work, people work cooperatively to achieve a specific task or goal (Sanyal, 2018). In group work, working together is very important and leads to significant task performance as stated, "Teamwork was found to be the most significant independent variable having the most significant impact on performance, followed by trust among team members, effective leadership in the team and proper system of performance", (Sanyal, 2018, p. 7).

The individual member of the group has the role to be performed in the group according to the prospects of the group. As Gencer (2019) noted, "The role refers to the attitude and behavior of individuals in accordance with the expectations from each other. In other words, "roles are patterns of behaviors in any social unit", (p.3). Roles can be shaped and developed as the preference of individuals or groups (Gencer, 2019). In a group, individuals need to have goals that may have a positive contribution to group performance, (Gencer, 2019).

In the group, there are certain stages that determine the life cycle of the group. Each group has a life cycle that can be classified into three: beginning stage, middle stage, and ending stage (Birnbaum, 2005). As Birnbaum (2005) noted, the first stage requires an introduction to the agenda and prepares the group for what comes first, the middle stage doing problem-solving, and the ending should include a summation of what happened and plans for another session.

### **Group Leadership**

In group leadership, leaders often give direction. Edmondson (2003) acknowledged, "Team leaders can help coordinate action when members otherwise might not know what to do", (p.2). In effective group leadership as Jassawala (2000) described, the leader should have a variety of human interaction skills in addition to possessing complementary technical talents. (Jassawala, 200).

“Team leaders must transform their behavior with regard to the way they interact with the environment, develop new theories of action, form new objectives, and define new strategies”, (Jassawala, 2000, p. 16).

In group leadership, participative leading is important because that allows team members what to work to achieve their objectives as Sauer (2011) stated, “A leader who uses a participative style allows team members to determine for themselves how they want to work to accomplish their objectives”, (p.3). “Participative leadership is defined as sharing of problem-solving by consulting with team members before making decision”, (Sauer, 2011, p. 3).

### **Christian Groups**

Groups and teams can be observed in the Bible. For instance, in Old Testament, God’s creation was a collaborative as it was shown as He made groups. After God created heaven and earth in the beginning, He made different creatures under it in order to live collectively. For example in His vegetation creatures, He created grass, the herb yielding seed, and fruit bearing trees in their kinds to be together as a system. “The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds”, (Gen. 1:11-12). God made man in the image of Him to have dominion over all the earth.

To create man, He said that, “Let us make man” which tells us there was a group in heaven-God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit (Gen. 1:26). In John 5: 17, 17:1 Jesus calls God, “my Father” so that God and the Son is the same to say, God and Jesus. The unity of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is stated in Mat., 28:19, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” They are called one God with a different body. We can see this also in John 14:15-16, 2Cor. 13:14, and 1Peter 1:2.

The first group God created was the family. God first created Adam and then his wife, “For this reason, a man will leave with his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh”, (Gen. 2:24). In another example, in Exodus 18, Jethro told Moses to organize a group of people that would judge upon Israelite people under Moses, (Exodus 18:21). Additionally, Nehemiah assigned a certain workers group by group to build the hall of the church, (Neh. Chapter 3 and 4).

In the New Testament, Jesus called the disciples to work with Him, (Matt. 4:18, Mr. 1:16-20, Luke, 5:1-11, John 1:35-42, Acts 1:1-2). The disciples found a constant prayer group joined together at Jerusalem, (Acts 1:14). Additionally, Paul and Silas as a group sent out by brothers through Syria and Cilicia to strengthen the churches (Acts 15: 40-41). Jesus also sends out disciples two by two, “ After this, the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go”. (Luke 10:1) There are many other examples mentioned about groups in the Bible. Thus, this indicates that group formation was the purpose of God to accomplish His tasks.

Churches around the world have realized the importance of coming together in groups as stated, “People from different cultures and backgrounds bring different experiences to the Bible and ask different questions of it and so see different things in the text”, (Arthur, 2013, p.1). Several benefits can be seen from groups within the church such as Gods presence, revelation, and unity.

It is believed that when groups gather, God’s presence is with them. “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I am with them”, (Mat 18:20). If we are with God, He also is with

us. Therefore, group devotion or group Bible learning commenced since Jesus' Gospel ministry on the earth, particularly during the period of the 12 Apostles' selection for this ministry. God's presence in such unity is obvious that He is there according to the promise given by Him. We can see this in the ministry of apostles in Acts. When the apostles and believers prayed together, the glory of God was revealed among them so that the place where they were meeting was shaken, (Acts 4:30-31).

We experience the presence of God when we are made in the image of God, as Boa (2018) stated, "We are made in the image of God and as image bearers we are relational—just like our maker and we are made for community and experience the presence of God in and through his people", (p.7).

The group Bible learning and study is a crucial method in which God discloses Himself to increase our relationship with him. As Van (2010) said, "God reveals Himself for the purpose of initiating and growing a personal relationship with us – a relationship of love", (p.10). God displays His excellence to us; "It is the glory of God that He displays His excellence. He chooses to reveal Himself to us so we, in response to seeing His excellence, would glorify Him. Ultimately then, God's self-revelation is to and for His glory", (Van, 2010, p.12).

God reveals heavenly gifts like speaking in tongues and prophecy within the religious life of a group or community as Dein (2015) suggested, "Receiving charismatic gifts is an important part of the religious life of the community and include speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing", (p.4).

Christian fellowship also increases unity. When Christians are together, essential things happen.

True Christian fellowship is both giving to and receiving from one another, focusing on Jesus Christ and the common unity of sharing and participation in His body (the church). Fellowship among believers is a result of intimate fellowship with the Savior, (Caster & Martensen, 2003, p. 82).

### **Structure of Groups in the Church**

In the utilization of groups, the church identifies a particular group and then develops programs to reach them consistent with the church mission. Cronshaw (2004) explained, "After identifying a particular group to focus on, marketing can help churches develop programs to reach those people in ways consistent with the church's mission", (p. 6). When church utilizes groups, they often class the group by appropriate age and department as Medina (2013) said, "many evangelical churches separate their Bible study classes by age. They send visitors to the class that is appropriate for their age. They have a youth department, a children's department, and so on to the end of the spectrum", (p. 4).

Churches are doing this because they know people naturally worship with, fellowship with, minister to, and evangelize to people who are in the same walk of life. The group study and learning need appropriate time, place, and mental preparation as well. As Gorden (2018) noted, "The four steps one can take towards forming the little Bible group are, " Pray about it, pick a time and a place where you would like to meet, think through what you would like your Bible group focus to be, and put yourself out there a little", (Gordon, 2018).

Based on this fact, group devotion like Bible study, Bible learning, prayer, and praising God through worship and singing have been considered Christians' life practice for spiritual growth and development.

### **Challenges of Groups**

All groups face challenges (Gorman, 2002) The challenges can be both relational and task-focused. Members of the group have their role to be accomplished. If they do not, the success of the group may be in danger Simon (1999) explained,

Every member of your group has important roles and responsibilities. Thus, a person who has no role to play shouldn't be a member of your group. Without a clearly defined role, a person isn't responsible for the success of the group. (p. 11).

The other group challenge in the group is members are from different backgrounds and have different interests. For example, as Hwa (2009) indicated about one group, " It was hard because everybody was from such different backgrounds and had different interests" ( p. 12).

Many participants reported the following as challenges in their group work experiences: difficulty understanding goals, lack of a sense of community, difficulty with communication, and lack of accountability. Across all levels of satisfaction in both sub groups, it appeared that difficulty understanding goals was the most challenging factor in group work. (Hwa, 2009, p.13)

Additionally, the individual can be dominated by the discussion by majority opinion as Burke (2011) wrote,

There may be pressure from the group to conform to the majority opinion, an individual may dominate the discussion, some members may rely too heavily on others to do the work, and it takes more time to work in a group than to work alone. (p. 2).

### **Challenges of Group Bible Study**

Although the group Bible learning has its benefit, there are certain challenges that can get in the way of the study. Wong (2021) noted that some of the challenges include practicality, efficacy, and lack of perfection in the group. "The difficulty with small groups is that no small group system is perfect. Said another way, nobody has figured out a small group of the church. Therefore, pastors and church staff often question their practicality and efficacy", (Wong, 2021, p. 5). The other challenge of the Bible group study is balancing time for the Scripture; meditating on God's Word, and relationship between the people in the group.

The challenge that pastors and church leaders must face is how to balance the study of Scripture and the relational component of small groups. How much time do the groups spend reading and meditating on God's Word as opposed to the application, conversation, and emotional and physical support? (Wong, 2021, p. 15)

### **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology used for this research is the qualitative research method. Qualitative case study research helps to investigate and examine a particular case in depth. The study involved careful and complete observation of the zonal devotion program for the case unit of SNLC. As I am a member of the church and an attendant of one of the zone devotion programs (participant

observer), I observed the situations weekly. Therefore, this enabled me to recognize closely the circumstances happening in the program and gave me a desire to study the case in depth.

Since I am acting as a participant-observer and eye witness; I had detailed information that helped me to collect as reliable data as possible. For this matter, the research questions, method rationale, ways of data collection, the respondent's selection for interview and survey questions, instrumentation, the researcher's role, data analysis plan, and ethical considerations will be discussed in detail hereafter.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions are the general questions on which the interview and survey questions are derived from.

#### **Thus the research questions are:**

RQ1: What are the goals and accomplishments of the SNLC Zonal Program?

RQ2: What are the leadership challenges in the SNLC Zonal Program?

### **Method Rationale**

After considering different qualitative methods, I determined that the most appropriate approach to this topic was the case study methodology. In this methodology the researcher can make a deep investigation of the particular case to find out rich information. As Noor (2008) wrote, "Case studies become particularly useful where one needs to understand some particular problem or situation in great-depth and where one can identify cases rich in information", (p. 3).

In the case study, a case is an event, an entity, an individual, or even a unit of analysis, (Noor, 2008). I am interested in case studies because case study concerns why things happen, allow the investigation of contextual reality, and the differences between what was planned and what actually occurred.

"Case study is not intended as the study of the entire organization. Rather is intended to focus on particular issues, and features of a unit of analysis. This method enables us to understand the complex real-life activities in which multiple sources of evidence were used", (Noor, 2008, p. 3).

In this study, the entire SNLC was not studied, but only the zonal program was considered as the unit of analysis.

### **Description of Sample**

Since it was not possible to interview all participants and leaders in the zonal program, taking a sample of leaders and members representing the whole population of the study area was mandatory. For this reason, I favored selecting church leaders and the zonal group leaders for interviews at different levels, thus using purposive sampling. Even though the zonal group leaders are in a position to lead and manage the zonal program, I initiated to communicate with and interview the SNLC church leaders first because they are the overall program implementers and leaders of the church who know about the detailed program implementation, including the execution of the zonal devotion program.

The SNLC church leaders (church administrators and spiritual department leaders), lead, govern, administer, inspect, and evaluate this program at the top level with other church programs. They are knowledgeable about the specifics of the zonal devotion program. Thus, initial interviews were with these individuals. Five people were interviewed: a senior pastor, a vice pastors, the other two pastors, and one elder, for a total of five people. Moreover, the senior pastor of the church was



involved in the interview at different times for various follow up comments as needed. Following the SNLC leaders, the zonal group leaders were interviewed as particular coordinators of this program.

These are the people who are serving as evangelists in the church. These evangelists coordinate this ministry as an additional task that was given to them from the church administration. There is no additional payment for this particular ministry rather than ministering voluntarily. Therefore, there were nine evangelists that act as zonal devotion group leaders in their respective zones which were all interviewed.

Finally, to gain understanding from the participants of the zonal devotion program, a written survey was conducted. The survey respondents were member participants of the program from each zone. Those individuals are engaged in government work, NGO workers, private workers, and traders, as well as others. These surveys were provided to them during the group; they complete the questions easily at their convenient time when they were at their home. In all twenty people participated in the survey portion of this study.

As it has been noted, three groups of people were interviewed or surveyed: a) church leaders, b) zonal devotion program leaders, and c) member participants. Table 1 outlines the respondents

**Table 1. The Data Presenting the Total Numbers of Respondents**

Types of respondents	Position	Total respondents	Data collection method	Remark
Level A	Church senior and vice pastors and a leader of the church	1 senior and 1 vice pastors, 2 other pastors, and 1 elder Total= 5	Interview	
Level B	Zonal group leaders (full-time ministers and evangelists)	9	Interview	All group leaders involved
Level C	Zone member participants	20	Survey question	From 9 different zones
<b>Total respondents</b>		<b>34</b>		

### Participant Gender Representation

The data was taken from both males as well as females. Table 2 shows the data

**Table2. Representation of Gender**

	Gender		
	M	F	T
<b>Quantity</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>34</b>

### Age Group of Respondents

Respondents were incorporated from different age groups (Table 3). All participants were above 30 years.

**Table 3. Age of Respondents**

	Range of Age Group			
	30-40	41-50	51-60	Above 60
<b>Quantity</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>4</b>

### Educational Level of the Respondents

People were selected from different educational statuses. Table 4 describes this.

**Table 4. Educational Level of Respondents**

Level of Education	Educational Background				
	Primary/Secondary	Diploma/Voca.	Degree	MA/MSc.	Above
<b>Quantity</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>

### Work Experiences of Respondents

The years of work experience of the entire respondents was noted under table 5.

**Table 5. Work Experiences of Respondents**

	Year of Experience				
	5-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	Above 40
<b>Quantity</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>1</b>

### Occupational Status of Member Participant Respondents

The occupational status of the sampling variables for group member participants of the zonal program (Level C) was collected. Therefore, the occupations of respondents include government workers, NGOs, traders, private workers, and others as outlined in table 5.

**Table 6**

**Occupation of Member Participant (level C) Respondents**

	Occupation Type				
	Government workers	NGOs	Traders	Private Workers	Others
<b>Quantity</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>

**Note:** these numbers represent level C respondents only who were engaged in their occupation

### Instrumentation

The primary data collection instruments were: a) structured interviews utilizing an interview protocol (Appendix D and Appendix E) for church leaders and zonal group leaders and b) survey questions (Appendix F) for member participant respondents. Semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were prepared so that the respondents could explain their thoughts freely and confidentially. As the questions were open, there was no limitation of ideas to be explained. This enabled me to collect sufficient information from both church and zonal group leaders.

For instance, there were the interview questions asked in leadership situation like what is leadership for you? Or how do you define leadership? These interview questions were presented for church and zonal group leaders because both of them were acting in leadership in different levels (Appendix D and Appendix E). Likewise, Are you frequently attending the program? If not, what are the causes that make you not attend usually? And what benefits does the program bring for you as far as you attend? Were some of the questions asked in survey questions (Appendix F).

Both the interview protocol and survey were first prepared by me in English and sent to my advisor for comment. After the comments and getting permission to proceed, interviewing of church leaders and group leaders took place. For survey, the questions were prepared in English first and then translated into Amharic before provision. Moreover, I read each question to every respondent to make clarification on each question. After accomplishing this, providing survey questions (Appendix F) for member participants was carried out. Prior to the survey, I explained, the participant Consent Form (Appendix C). I had already discussed with them about my research when I was communicated initially.

### **The Researcher's Role**

Since the research describes the existing information about the zonal devotion program of the church that I attend, I began the study with thoughts of my own about the program. Therefore, it was helpful to collect sufficient information from a variety of participants that allowed me to reach informed analysis. As I studied a social phenomenon, it was very necessary to conduct this research. As PRIA International Academy (2013) stated, "Social science research is the systematic understanding of social facts or phenomena. It gathers information about the social world, interpreting it in order to make decisions on a course of actions and/or to develop new knowledge", (p.7).

As a researcher, I developed the confidence to create an attractive approach for the respondents as Coughlan (2009) suggested to get a meaningful and successful outcome of the research, interview planning needed to take into consideration both interviewer and interviewee, "To ensure a successful and meaningful outcome, the complexities of planning and implementing the interview need to be viewed from the perspective of both the interviewer and interviewee", (Coughlan, 2009, p. 6). Therefore, I considered how I could best ask the questions in a way that was most comfortable and appropriate for both the participants and me.

I prepared the interview questions (Appendix D, Appendix E) and survey questions (Appendix F), selected pertinent participants, and collected data within three months period of time. However, the introduction and literature review writings were carried out in the midst of these periods. Respect and giving credit to respondents was necessary to get a good response. During the interview, I clearly understood the responses of the respondents to avoid misunderstanding ideas before conclusion was given. As a researcher, my hope is that the research I conducted will accurately and adequately describe the overall SNLC zonal devotion program noting both the benefits and challenges of the program, so that the reader could understand.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Prior to commencing the study, I communicated with the church administrators: the senior and the vice pastors and elder of the SNLC to brief about my research and get permission to conduct the research concerning the zonal devotion program. I took a letter from my academic advisor (Appendix A) to the church to document the research I was doing. After the preparation

of relevant interview and survey questions (Appendix D, Appendix E, and Appendix F), and careful consideration of respondents from various concerned units of analysis, I communicated with the church and zonal group leader (level A and level B) respondents for an interview and member participant (level C) respondents to complete survey questions.

I explained for member participants that I had permission from the church. I orally discussed with church leaders about the study whereas zonal group leaders and member participants were informed by interview Consent Form (Appendix B and Appendix C) respectively. After this, all three level respondents agreed to become participants for the research. Each participant was informed that their information would be secured to maintain their anonymity and to give the response confidentially. The respondent's demographic data was taken systematically while using pseudonyms; the age data was taken by putting a range of years. The interview and survey questions are an open and semi-structured type which lets the respondent feel free to explain all the ideas that they had about the program. Church leaders' interview was carried out at first to keep the procedure with in the appropriate cultural practice of the church.

I interviewed the five SNCL leaders- the senior pastor, vice pastor, the other two pastors, and an elder. I interviewed them separately through note taking at different place and time after the submission of interview protocol letter (Appendix A). First I thanked them for their willingness to respond the interview and then I started interviewing the questions one by one. After completion of the interview I also thanked them for giving their time.

In another day, nine zonal group leaders interview took place individually at separate day, different time in various locations. As I had received information from church leaders about zonal group leaders, I separately called these group leaders to meet for discussion about my thesis. During our first meeting, I asked them to become the participants for my research and explained that I had permission from the church. After they agreed on this, we discussed to meet another day for interview. On the next meeting day, the interview took place as we talked to meet at separate day in different locations. The interview was taken through note writing and then after giving thanks, I departed. Hence I interviewed the whole group leaders I intended to interview (100 percent of the participant).

**Table 7**

***Number of Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 Respondents and Their Respective Zonal Locations***

Type of Respondents	Names of Zonal Groups								
	Zone A	Zone B	Zone C	Zone D	Zone E	Zone F	Zone G	Zone H	Zone I
Church Leaders	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	1
Group Leaders	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Member respondents	2	1	3	2	5	-	4	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>

Regarding survey question participants, I selected twenty individuals (male and female) representing different numbers from each zone groups. The above figure (Table 7) presents the number of participants from each zone. After selection of the above participants, I went to each of

their houses and told them about the purpose of the study and discussed the Consent Form (Appendix C). During the next day, I provide them Amharic versioned survey question in order to take back after one week. At the final contact, I received the completed paper from each of them and then departed, thanking them for their participation. Before departure, attention was given to check whether the questions were completed properly. This was to ask for clarification if ideas were not clear.

For instance, a lady from zone C did not fill some question among listed. When I asked about this, she responded she didn't understand what the question was asking. I explained the question and she then completed it. The survey return rate was 95% which means one participant did not return his survey question even though I repeatedly asked him to do so. Then I left that document and started to use the documents that I had in my hand which was sufficient for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

According to (Harding, 2013) qualitative data analysis is the formal interpretation of collected data to create order, elicit meaning and communicate findings. Data was analyzed after the collection of all the important data from the research zones. The data analysis took place through defining, analyzing, interpreting, and summarizing the existing data. After I collected all data response (the interview and survey), I separated the documents in their different levels in order to analyze the information separately.

Since the interview questions of church leaders and zonal group leaders were almost similar other than some minor differences, I brought together the same question answers of different respondents by separate sheet through note taking and the next question responses in the sheet differentiating- the answers with respect to the questions. In this manner, I categorized all interview question responses. I did the same procedure for survey responses too. After that, I sorted out similar ideas for similar questions in one side and different information in the other side to compare and contrast ideas in findings. Then codes and themes were developed to write findings.

Finally, after rearranging and summarizing the information, I put these response documents properly and safely separating into their levels in order to review them again if need comes, creating both themes and sub-themes.

### **Validation Strategies**

To find the valid data for my research, I thoroughly observed the data, got a clear insight about it, and found the right interpretation for the reliability of the information. In addition to this, I clearly understood the right concept about the particular subject from the completed response before writing the result. To do this, I checked all the answers to the questions during receiving the completed survey form. Additionally by interviewing many participants, I was able to check the data for accuracy and consistency.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To collect the appropriate information for my research, first I followed the principles of ethical issues such as taking my school permission letter, providing the letter to the church, and getting permission to conduct the research. In this manner, I talked with all stakeholders and obtained permission for the study. These were important ethical issues I emphasized before the research commenced. Mathers (2002) described, "ethical responsibilities are primarily to the individual and that every human being, including yourself, should be respected even if this may have some unfortunate consequences", ( p. 9).

Moreover, all research participants of this study were informed about the objectives of the study, and they were interviewed of their own will. Level B and level C respondents were informed about the participant Consent Form (Appendix B and Appendix C). The personal identity of the research participants was also confidential; hence, their key personal identities like names and ages were not disclosed; instead, pseudonyms were used.

## METHEDODS

The study samples were taken from three levels which represents church leaders, zonal group leaders, and member participant respondent respectively. Before data collection process began, the ethical issues were well thought out. At first, permission letter was taken from Wolaita Evangelical Seminary (WES) and given to the church administration in order to get permission.

### Data Analysis Procedures

To find the result, the collected data were thoroughly observed, defined, interpreted, and analyzed to give meaning for the study. Thematic analysis was the way I analyzed the data in which similar words and thoughts were labeled as codes. From looking at these codes carefully, the common idea that represents codes together were identified and called themes.

## RESULTS

### Participation Rate

The following chart (Table 8) presents the rate of most attendants from all nine zones.

**Table 8**

*Participation Rates*

Total Participant in the Church			Active Participant in the Zonal Program		
M	F	T	M	F	T
1,887	2,123	4,010	886	1,006	1,892

### SNLC Organizational Structure

The church has its own organizational structure that indicates how the church leaders govern the entire church implementations. This shows what the general leadership of the church looks like and how each department interrelated and interconnected to each other.

#### *Sodo New Life Church (SNLC) Organizational Structure/ Organogram*

governor of the church implementation; this is an unpaid position because he is working as a part time worker who has his own work. But he will pay allowance if he calls for meetings anywhere with the recognition of the church. Under elders, there are Senior Pastor and Human Resource Development Service. The Senior Pastor controls all spiritual departments. The spiritual department is comprised of: Youth Ministry, Women Ministry, Children Ministry, Program Coordinator, Prayer Ministry Committee, Marriage Counselor, Education and Training, and Media and Communication.

This spiritual department has its board in which the senior pastor is head of the board and head of each sub ministries are members of the board. In addition to this, Bible school board, great

commission board, and the zonal category service are responsible to the Senior Pastor. Regarding the zonal category service, the nine zones are divided in to four categories intended for better follow up system. In this way, each two zones are supervised by one pastor so that six zones are supervised by three pastors and the remaining three zones are supervised by one another pastor; so that in total four pastors supervise these nine zones. These four pastors communicate with their respective zonal devotion program leaders.

Then after, the four zonal category representative pastors are responsible for one coordinator pastor which is in turn responsible to the senior pastor of the church. In addition to this, the four zonal category leaders observe, control, and supervise the activities of their two or three zones devotion programs and submit the report to their coordinator. The coordinator then submits the total zonal reports to the senior pastor and then to the chief of administrators, Eiders. In other side, the elder also looks over deacons, community service, and development services. Then the administration, secretary, accountant, property management, and general service are under the human resource service.

#### **Performance Evaluation of the Program.**

Performance monitoring and evaluation is one of the core activities the church follows to evaluate the zonal devotion program performance. As the church was part of activity planning, it also is involved in monitoring and evaluation. At the beginning of the year, the church (church administration and spiritual department) prepared a zonal devotion work plan with other activity plans. The Senior Pastor presented this plan for church members during a worship date at church. In this time, the members were asked to comment about the overall plan that was presented.

Based on the constructive comments forwarded from the members that were acceptable by church management, it was approved as the final yearly plan of the church. Within this procedure, the zonal plan was distributed to the whole zones to be implemented, according to Mr. Dereje, the Senior Pastor of the church. Before going to perform zonal devotion program, all the zonal leaders talk together to have the same document that would be performed. After that, the same performance occurred at each nine zones.

For instance if they are studying Paul's messages from New Testament, they all cascade the same Paul message study in every zone. As Hailu, vice church pastor indicated, church representatives from different ministry divisions including pastors will follow and visit accomplishment of the work. In three month interval, the zone leaders present the report to the corporate meeting at church level and discuss that. In this time, they discuss on the ministry in detail and evaluate their accomplishments.

During this evaluation time, the zonal leaders described the performance and the problems they encountered. Then the church management works together to solved the existing problems in a common consensus. Thus the discussion takes place for the remaining months of the fiscal year. Mr. Teshome, the zonal group leader said, "The management reviewed the rest duties; take the improvement actions, and put the improvement directions for remaining months. "

#### **Benefits of the Zonal Devotion Program**

As the zonal devotion program had its purpose and goal, it also had certain benefits for the zonal participants who are involved regularly in the program. The benefits that emerged from the interviews will be discussed in these themes: a) anchoring people in the Word, b) promoting minister's spiritual service, and c) personal matters.

#### ***Anchoring People in the Word***

In the Bible learning and devotion program at zone level, the parents and family members learn the Word that leads them to the fear of God. Mr. Markos, zone A member participant suggested that, "We learn the Word of God and worship together regularly in this program." Learning the Word of God in this program also helps parents to fulfill God's rules and instructions that enable them to lead their family effectively, Mr. Markos noted.

Members benefit in knowing the Word, which helps them withstand the false teachings. Mrs. Ayelech, zone D participant suggested that, "learning and studying the Bible in the zonal program is getting a blessing and sweet life from Christ to live the truth life and build righteousness." Moreover, those who exercise the right Christian life could be the witness of God for those who are not saved, as she responded in the interview. One of the level C respondents stated that, "The Bible teaching I taught in the zonal program helped me to lead my family in the way of truth. God's Word counsels me, comforts me, restores me to error, and makes me see." The zonal program helps us increase the gift of grace, and we learn about the Lord's Supper and tithes," Mrs. Meskerem, zone C group leader suggested.

#### ***Promoting Ministers Spiritual Service***

In the zonal devotion program the minister's ministry was cultivated, assessed, and evaluated to serve within zonal program and then able them to serve in the church program. Due to this program the ministers initiated, their spiritual inspiration increased time to time, and assisted to equip in good experience. "The man who does not continuously serve and grow his ministry in zonal program cannot pass to the church ministry," Mr. Mesay, the other church pastor noted. This program also brought spiritual restoration and guidance for ministers and members as a whole.

#### ***Support in Personal Matters***

In zonal programs, the people who are in financial need are supported with food items such as flour, oil, and money in order to build members morale. The zonal members support those members who are in food shortage. To do this, group individuals contribute money, clothes, and whatever they have for those who need assistance. For this purpose, the budget has been set aside to help the poor in the church. The church Senior Pastor, Mr. Dereje, mentioned about this that, "church have budget that was budgeting as a plan at the beginning of the year as budgeting for other activities too." Hence the poor are assisted during the spiritual holidays regularly. The zone C administrative committee member, who gave the food items, noted that, "About 15 people in our zone are given certain amount of money and flour."

In addition to this, at times the zonal attendants need the benefit a supportive or recommendation letter. Even though the letter is given by the church, it needs a supportive letter from the zone. Otherwise, the church does not give the recommendation letter. Thus a person who attends the zonal program can benefit in this way.

#### **Challenges of the Zonal Devotion Program**

All programs face challenges, and the SNLC zonal program is no exception. Some of the specific challenges include attendance, administrative issues, and lack of maturity,

##### ***Attendance***

One of the main challenges for this program is attendance; people do not fully attend this program. Some ignore the program and others are simply busy in their own lives and work. "Most people, especially youth do not know the purpose of the zone program so that big number do not participate this program. They focus on channel programs rather than participate in zonal programs", said Mr. Tarekegn, zone G group leader. This can be documented by the following



chart (Table 8) data that identify total member attendants, regular attendants, as well as moderate attendants.

**Table 9**

***Members Attendants Data***

Total Member Attendants			Regular Attendants			Moderate Attendants		
M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
1,887	2,123	4,010	886	1,006	1,892	999	1,114	2,113

From this figure, one can conclude that only 47% of the total church populations are regular attenders; whereas 53% were moderate attendants of the zonal program.

Even though most members have knowledge about this program, they have less interest to participate in the program. In addition to this, some members prefer spending time to be with their friends, relatives, and work staff. In such behavior, they may ignore spiritual unity as well. As the response of some of member participants indicated, members who engaged in private works and traders are not attending in this program because of their work schedule. They come back to their home from their work place at evening time. This case is also the same for government workers.

Since the time an employee leaves work is not fit with that of the devotion beginning time, it is difficult for such individuals to participate this program. Still others decide to engage in entertainment or television. “Now days’, focusing on television program is taking most people attention than focusing on studying and learning the Word of God. There is a tendency to take more time through watching television”, Asnakech, zone B member participant commented.

***Administrative Issues***

A number of administrative issues are hindering the zonal programs. Most zonal programs are implemented in rented houses due to the absence of a permanent devotion hall. The rent house restricts freedom of worship because it is a private house where people with in the compound are doing their own work, which that limits devotion program activities. Mr. Tamirat, member participant of zone I noted that, “Due to the case of instability of rent house, some members leave this program, because of the frequent shift of rent house.” Finally, the zone program has financial shortage to facilitate the programs in a good way. There is lack of many of the necessary materials like musical instruments, microphone, speakers, etc. Therefore, zonal programs are not operating in the best conditions or with adequate equipment.

***Lack of Maturity***

Lack of maturity is a problem with in the zonal program that shows up in different ways. There are still unchanged life practices shown by people such as lack of love, rejection of unity, and disobedience among members. There is spiritual weakness, heart disunity, and lack of humbleness which were identified by some of the study participants. Hence such people do not participate in zonal program, Mr. Hailu, vice pastor of the church said.

At times, people who have a conflict with another member do not attend the program. This is happening due to unwillingness to solve the problem appropriately. Hating brothers avoid being with them is a sign of immaturity that impacts this program. . The main case for this is refusing reconciliation. Mr. Jemberu, a leader of zone I, stated that “people yet in the state of not readiness to solve problems that have with brothers.”

**Study Participant Suggestions for Improvement**

For better performance of the zonal program, the participants and leaders made suggestion for improvement. The participants complained about the lack of church main leaders to visit members' homes. "The church main leaders- senior pastor, elders, and vice pastors should visit members in addition to the zonal leaders and committee members of the particular zone," Mr. Mengesha, member participant of group G. In addition to this, they suggested the importance of providing training and motivation and encouragement as discussed below.

### ***Providing Training***

Training changes people's thinking to some extent. It helps to fulfill the knowledge gap of individuals. Mr. Ayenew, elder of the church, suggested that, "Teaching the importance of participation may awake to understanding things." The other church pastor mentioned that, "The church provides capacity building training for all level ministers at church level at once or twice with in the year to prepare themselves in their multidimensional ministry." The types of trainings given were leadership, management, and women ministry.

### ***Motivation and Encouragement***

Motivation inspires people to participate. It is important to remind colleagues about the value of being together in the program. Inviting people to go together for devotion creates inner motivation for people who do not attend. "Showing love and making the program gorgeous can attract people to attend this program," Mr. Tarekegn, zone G group leader commented. In addition to this advising and counseling sometimes may have value on changing behavior of people. Creating a discussion session to ask why people do not attend the zonal program may also solve attendance problem, Senbeto, zone H group leader noted.

Encouragement and initiation to participate in the program may bring change after time. Mr. Hailu, the vice pastor of the church mentioned that, "The church planned to start home-to-home Bible study program to initiate studying the Bible at home level." Mr. Tamirat zone I member participant suggested that, It is better the zone program had mini-conference for the members once at a year."

Additionally, inviting new minsters in the program may attract members to attend the program. Mrs. Serkalem, zone B member participant, commented that, "The practical life of zonal leaders and administrative committees is very important to practice the same by followers and in contrast, if the leader does not do what he says, followers do not trust the leader. The zonal devotion time should center most people's appropriate time to attend the program. Mr. Ketema, zone E group leaders stated, "If there is need to be participant's fullness, it is better, rechecking the time arrangement of the program." Moreover, "Finding permanent worship place is very important to settle members for safe worship, Mengesha," zone C member participant stated.

## **DISCUSSION**

As the study focused on group devotion of SNLC, the study examined what was the importance of being in a group to study the Bible.

People were made by God to be in the community and live together. Studying the Bible in a group made the group members to understand the Word because God existed in the group as Matt. 18: 20 indicates. Christians need to read the Bible because it is the rule for Christian's life. If there is need to change the believer's life, they must read the Bible on a regular basis and need to live accordingly.

Findings of the study showed several similarities with the ideas stated in the literature review in that the importance of communication and relationship of group devotion was stated in both the literature review and in the study result as the purpose of the study. The group of the SNLC was organized based on the ideas that God created community people to be together. In the literature review the purpose of group formations were for group Bible study and working for God's duty such as judging in conflicts (Jethro and working together Nehemiah) and Gospel out reach of disciples in Acts (New Testament); whereas the purpose of zonal group devotion was strengthening communication and relationship of members but the Bible study was considered as the benefit of the zonal group devotion which was little bit different from the ideas stated in the literature review.

The goal of the zonal devotion program was to empower the ministers with in the zonal program and then when they grow in good manner to enhance them to serve in church ministries. But it was more focused on the establishment of the new church after members increased and well-structured multidimensional as that particular zone situation permits. The leadership understanding, definition, and meaning of church leaders and the zonal group leaders were seen somewhat similar in one side but also different in the other sides.

As level A respondents, the summarized idea of leadership was defined as, "Leadership is being in front and following others by their willingness. It is also making people Jesus followers but not leaders' followers." "Christian leadership is making people the disciples of Jesus", Mr. Mesay, the other church pastor noted. Whereas leadership for one of the zonal group leader is "A man who going before people to attract and pull the followers by being model in his life." The other zonal group leader suggested that, "Leadership is responsibility and also hard task. It is showing the way, praying for people, growing followers, and leading peoples according to the Word of God", which was similar idea as Bass (1985) stated in the literature review.

"Leader is a man who has followers, has vision, and able to create influence on others," the other zonal group leader commented. For the rest of the zonal group leaders, leadership is teaching, counseling, and leading people through humbleness. And still others defined the leadership as it is stewardship, being shepherd; give his life for sheep as Jesus did. Since the above leadership traits were more focused on submission and Jesus' model of leadership, it relates to servant leadership and transformational leadership theory as mentioned in the literature review.

The structure of the zonal program was founded by organizing neighbors in their locality to devote together and to cope with harsh situations during the Ethiopian Derg regime. Taking this condition as good practice, the zonal program continued till now by nine different zones under the SNLC. The mirrors the actions of Christians gathering together in the book of Acts in the New Testament. For example we can see the followership of the believers,

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

In addition to this, the performance evaluation accomplishment was described under leadership and structure of the program. The church evaluates activity performance evaluate per quarter level through the meeting at church level. In this evaluation, all administrative body of the church: elders, spiritual departments, pastors, and various department heads involve in the meeting. The

benefit of the zonal devotion program was more stressed on as the program anchor people in the Word, nurturing the Word to have knowledge of the Scripture and to protect self from false teachings, and supporting issues of members in various matters.

The major and core challenges of the zonal devotion program was the attendance problem of members for devotion due to spending time on entertainments, watching TV channels, and unsettled situation of devotion hall. These problems were unaccomplishment of the role of the group, less understanding of goals, lack of accountability, and lack of perfection in the group as the similar problems appeared by scholars Hwa (2009), Gorman (2002), and Wong (2021) that was seen in the literature review. Providing training for the zonal group leaders and committee members on leadership and motivating and encouraging members to participate in the zonal program were the suggestions forwarded to improve the zonal devotion program as a whole.

The zonal group program administers sometimes politicize the program in that they assign the people who are friends to serve in the zonal program rather than those who can serve properly. (The other level C respondent commented). This comment also surprised me because it may be true or false.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommendations can be made based on comments from participants. The church administration has to search and find permanent devotion hall for the zonal programs. The short-time solution for this problem may be searching for free-paid house that can be obtained among the Christian members of the zone. The long-term solution may be building a permanent house; although that needs great effort in terms of money and other related things. Even though it is difficult to control people's behavior and interest, teaching the Word, counseling, and encouragement are important to initiate zonal members to attend the program.

The immaturities of people will be alleviated through time so that following and motivating is necessary routinely. Major church ministers who serve in church level programs should also come to minister in the zonal programs. It also is better ministering church choir in zone level by shifting them from one zone to another. The church intention to launch home-to-home Bible study program was encouraging that had already the startup duties.

The church has a good structure to address its members through zonal programs as well as zonal home-to-home visit with the zonal committees. However, it is worthy to the church main leaders and main pastors to also visit their members at their house as much as possible through preparing visit plan. Jesus, the shepherd of the sheep also visited people during His time of ministry. This is why the current church leaders have to visit even though there is time shortage to visit all members of the church rather than leaving the believers for zonal leaders and committees only. For instance, Jesus visited Marry and Martha (Luke 10:42, Nain women (7:11), Simon home visit, (Matt 26:6), Zaccaeus' visit (Luke 19:1-5), and the like. As we seen this, Jesus didn't leave the disciples alone to visit believers. "Because members are more pleased and inspired when the leaders visit them and pray for their problems", Tarekegh, zone G group leader noted. This doesn't mean that the zonal committee members visit is valueless or useless, but the church main leaders visit has more credible for members that make them to feel 'I also remembered by church'.

To strengthen this devotion program, leaders must use new motivational techniques to get people to attend the program. Previous practices have not worked, so new methods must be found. The different zonal ministry departments like youth, women, children, prayer group, and home-to-to visit must continue to be strengthened in their ministry in order to grow the members spiritually. In addition to this, the most important thing is praying to God regularly about the program. The leaders should lead God's flocks in polite and passionate heart and should teach the Word of God worthily.

Since these are the last days, the church should awake to work God's duty by the power of God as the Bible says; "I can do all things through Christ which strengthen me." (Phi. 4:13)" and "My brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might," (Eph. 6:10)

For effective zonal devotion program, I recommend conducting additional deep research to incorporate various experts from different disciplines and involving elders and key informants in the area to search out the root causes of short comings and find improved practices for conducting the zonal program.

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