

God Is More Powerful, But the Prophet is Closer: The Spiritual Security Framework for Understanding Seventh-Day Adventist Migration to Spirit Churches in Rural Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Despite the remarkable growth of Christianity across sub-Saharan Africa, beliefs concerning witchcraft and spiritual causality continue to shape the lived experiences of many Christians. Within rural African communities, illness, unexplained deaths, infertility, poverty, and persistent misfortune are frequently interpreted through cosmological frameworks that recognize the active influence of supernatural forces. This study investigates why some members of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in Kaumba Mission District, Zambia, migrate to Zionist and other Spirit Churches despite affirming belief in God's supreme authority over evil. Employing a phenomenological qualitative design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with ten participants who had either left the SDA Church or were considering doing so because of fears associated with witchcraft. Thematic analysis identified five interrelated themes: the persistence of witchcraft as a lived explanatory framework; perceived inadequacies in Adventist pastoral responses; the attraction of visible expressions of spiritual power; the paradox of affirming God's sovereignty while perceiving prophets as more immediately accessible; and the search for spiritual security rather than theological alternatives. Building on these findings, the article proposes the Spiritual Security Framework (SSF) as a contextual missiological lens for understanding ecclesial migration within African Christianity. The framework argues that resilient Christian discipleship is strengthened when biblical assurance, relational pastoral presence, worshipping community, and contextual discipleship function together to cultivate confidence in God's protecting presence. The study concludes that the migration of Adventists to Spirit Churches is fundamentally a pastoral and missiological challenge rather than merely a doctrinal one.

Keywords: African Christianity; contextual mission; ecclesial migration; existential fear; phenomenology; Seventh-day Adventist Church; spiritual security; witchcraft; Zambia.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of Christianity across Africa represents one of the most significant developments in contemporary global Christianity. Yet this remarkable numerical expansion has not eliminated deeply rooted indigenous understandings of spiritual reality. Across many African societies, Christians continue to interpret illness, unexplained death, infertility, persistent poverty, and family misfortune through worldviews that acknowledge the interaction between visible and invisible spiritual forces. Consequently, belief in God's sovereignty frequently coexists with profound fears of witchcraft and other manifestations of supernatural evil (Bauer, 2017; Onongha, 2017).

As Bruce L. Bauer (2017) has demonstrated, witchcraft in Africa is rooted in at least seven basic worldview assumptions, including the belief that almost every problem or evil that affects people is caused by evil spiritual powers. Samuel D. Lumwe (2017) further observes that the persistence of these beliefs remains an undeniable reality that mission must address. These realities present an important challenge for Christian mission. Although churches faithfully proclaim Christ's victory over evil, many believers continue to seek additional forms of spiritual assurance when confronted by circumstances interpreted as manifestations of witchcraft. This

phenomenon is particularly evident in parts of sub-Saharan Africa where Zionist, Apostolic, and Pentecostal Spirit Churches have experienced sustained growth by offering ministries of prophecy, healing, deliverance, and communal prayer that directly address existential fears (Anderson, 1992). In this article, the term Spirit Churches refers to a broad family of African Initiated Churches (AICs), including many Zionist, Apostolic, and prophet-led independent churches that emphasize the immediate activity of the Holy Spirit through prophecy, divine healing, deliverance (exorcism), visions, dreams, fervent prayer, and discernment of the spiritual causes of suffering. Although these churches differ considerably in doctrine, organization, and liturgical practice, they generally share a strong emphasis on confronting perceived spiritual threats such as witchcraft, ancestral influences, curses, and demonic oppression through visible expressions of spiritual power. In Zambia, the expression “Spirit Churches” is commonly used as a popular umbrella term for these movements.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has long maintained a comprehensive biblical understanding of spiritual warfare through its doctrine of the Great Controversy. Adventist theology consistently affirms God’s sovereignty, Christ’s decisive victory over Satan, and the believer’s assurance through Scripture. Nevertheless, translating these theological convictions into pastoral practices that meaningfully address members’ lived experiences remains a continuing challenge within many African contexts. In rural Zambia, anecdotal evidence and pastoral observations suggest that some Adventist members leave for Spirit Churches not because they reject Adventist doctrine, but because they perceive those churches as more capable of responding to fears associated with witchcraft and spiritual attacks.

Existing scholarship has made significant contributions to understanding the persistence of witchcraft beliefs within African Christianity, the growth of African Initiated Churches, and the dynamics of contextualization and syncretism (Anderson, 1992; Bauer, 2017; Bosch, 2011; Onongha, 2017). However, comparatively little attention has been given to how perceptions of pastoral responsiveness influence ecclesial migration among Christians who remain committed to orthodox biblical beliefs. Most studies have focused on theological explanations for the persistence of indigenous worldviews, while fewer have explored how pastoral ministry shapes believers’ confidence in God’s protective presence during periods of existential vulnerability. This gap limits our understanding of why doctrinally committed Christians sometimes seek spiritual assistance outside their own ecclesial traditions.

This study addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of former and current Seventh-day Adventist members in Kaumba Mission District, Monze District, Zambia, who have either migrated or contemplated migrating to spirit churches because of fears associated with witchcraft. Employing a phenomenological qualitative approach, the study seeks to answer three research questions: (1) How do participants understand the relationship between witchcraft and everyday life? (2) Why do they perceive the Seventh-day Adventist Church as inadequate in addressing these concerns? (3) Why are Spirit Churches regarded as providing more credible experiences of spiritual protection?

Rather than interpreting ecclesial migration primarily as evidence of doctrinal decline or religious syncretism, this article argues that the phenomenon reflects a deeper search for spiritual security—the lived assurance that God’s protecting presence is experienced as biblically grounded, pastorally accessible, and communally affirmed. Building upon participants’ narratives, the study proposes the Spiritual Security Framework (SSF) as a contextual missiological model that explains how churches may strengthen resilient Christian discipleship through the integration of biblical assurance, relational pastoral presence, worshipping community, and contextual discipleship.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Engaging the Scholarly Debates

2.1 Witchcraft and African Christian Worldviews

One of the enduring realities of Christianity in Africa is the persistence of indigenous cosmological assumptions concerning spiritual causality. Although Christianity has become the dominant religion in many African societies, conversion has not necessarily displaced deeply rooted beliefs about witchcraft, ancestral influence, and

supernatural agency. Rather, Christian faith and indigenous worldviews frequently coexist, creating complex interpretive frameworks through which believers understand suffering, illness, death, and prosperity (Bauer, 2017; Onongha, 2017).

Within many African cosmologies, reality is understood holistically, encompassing both visible and invisible dimensions of existence. Human experiences are therefore interpreted not solely through biological, psychological, or economic explanations but also through relationships involving God, spiritual beings, ancestors, and malevolent forces. Misfortune is seldom viewed as random; instead, it is frequently attributed to intentional spiritual causation, including witchcraft or sorcery. Consequently, questions concerning protection from supernatural harm become central to religious life and profoundly influence how communities evaluate spiritual leadership.

Bauer (2017) argues that cultural foundations for fear of witchcraft in Africa are deeply embedded in traditional worldviews that continue to shape the experiences of committed Christians. His analysis demonstrates that these fears are not merely residual superstitions but are integral to how many Africans understand causality, community, and spiritual reality. Similarly, Onongha (2017) observes that accusations of witchcraft, fears of spiritual attack, and the search for supernatural protection continue to confront churches across Africa despite widespread Christian conversion. Together, these studies suggest that the challenge facing African Christianity is not merely theological but also pastoral, requiring churches to engage seriously with believers' lived experiences rather than assuming that doctrinal instruction alone will transform deeply held worldviews.

However, the persistence of witchcraft beliefs should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of incomplete conversion or theological immaturity. Such conclusions risk oversimplifying the dynamic relationship between culture and faith. As missiologists have long observed, conversion is an ongoing process through which biblical revelation gradually reshapes existing cultural assumptions rather than replacing them instantaneously. Consequently, many African Christians continue to interpret life's uncertainties through inherited cosmological frameworks while simultaneously affirming central Christian doctrines. This tension forms an important backdrop for understanding ecclesial migration within contemporary African Christianity.

2.2 Spirit Churches and the Search for Spiritual Efficacy

The remarkable growth of Zionist, Apostolic, and Pentecostal churches throughout sub-Saharan Africa has generated considerable scholarly interest. A recurring theme within the literature is the capacity of these churches to address the concrete existential concerns confronting ordinary believers. Unlike many historic mission-founded churches that emphasize doctrinal instruction and sacramental worship, Spirit Churches frequently integrate prophecy, divine healing, deliverance, and communal prayer into their pastoral ministry, offering culturally intelligible responses to suffering and spiritual insecurity (Anderson, 1992).

Anderson's (1992) pioneering work on Zionist and Pentecostal churches in Southern Africa argues that their expansion cannot be understood solely through theological categories. Rather, these movements gained legitimacy because they addressed questions that many mission churches left unanswered, particularly those relating to illness, infertility, misfortune, poverty, and witchcraft. By engaging these realities directly, Spirit Churches provided believers with practical mechanisms for interpreting and responding to experiences that indigenous cosmologies regarded as manifestations of spiritual conflict.

Subsequent scholarship has reinforced this perspective, suggesting that the attraction of Spirit Churches lies not merely in their emphasis on miraculous phenomena but also in their ability to integrate theology with everyday experience. Prophetic ministry, communal prayer, and healing rituals function as visible expressions of divine involvement within the lives of believers. Consequently, these churches often communicate spiritual authority through pastoral action rather than theological exposition alone.

2.3 Adventist Theology, the Great Controversy, and Contextual Ministry

The Seventh-day Adventist Church approaches spiritual warfare from within the theological framework of the Great Controversy, which understands human history as the arena of an ongoing cosmic conflict between Christ

and Satan. This perspective affirms both the reality of evil spiritual powers and the ultimate victory of Christ through His life, death, resurrection, and continuing heavenly ministry. Consequently, Adventist theology provides a comprehensive biblical foundation for understanding spiritual conflict while consistently rejecting occult practices and magical forms of protection.

Despite this rich theological heritage, the application of the Great Controversy theme within African pastoral contexts has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Onongha (2017) argues that fears of witchcraft continue to challenge Adventist mission because members frequently seek practical responses to spiritual insecurity that extend beyond doctrinal explanation. Similarly, Chulu (2014) contends that effective ministry in Zambia requires biblical teaching on spiritual warfare to be accompanied by intentional prayer, pastoral care, and confidence in God's protecting power. Chiinya's (2022) study of Seventh-day Adventists in Southern Zambia further demonstrates that fears associated with witchcraft continue to influence some members' decisions to consult traditional diviners despite regular church participation.

Collectively, these studies reveal that the issue confronting Adventist mission is not the absence of theological resources but the translation of those resources into pastoral practices that address believers' existential concerns. The Great Controversy doctrine proclaims Christ's victory over evil, yet participants in the present study frequently questioned how that victory was experienced within the realities of illness, bereavement, and perceived spiritual attack. This observation suggests that contextual mission involves not only communicating theological truth but also embodying that truth through pastoral ministry.

2.4 Contextual Mission, Syncretism, and Ecclesial Migration: A Critical Debate

The relationship between Christianity and African traditional worldviews has generated significant scholarly debate. Three primary arguments have emerged to explain the phenomenon of ecclesial migration among African Christians, and examining these debates clarifies the distinct contribution of the present study.

Argument One: Ecclesial Migration as Syncretism or Dual Allegiance

Some scholars have interpreted the persistence of traditional practices among Christians as evidence of syncretism or dual allegiance. This perspective argues that when believers continue to consult diviners, participate in traditional rituals, or seek protection from spirit mediums, they are compromising the uniqueness of Christian faith. From this viewpoint, ecclesial migration represents theological confusion or incomplete conversion requiring doctrinal correction (Bosch, 2011; Hiebert, 1987). Bosch (2011) argues that authentic Christian mission requires the gospel to engage cultures critically while remaining faithful to biblical revelation. Similarly, Hiebert (1987) introduced the concept of critical contextualization, emphasizing that cultural beliefs and practices should neither be accepted uncritically nor rejected indiscriminately but evaluated through the authority of Scripture.

Argument Two: Ecclesial Migration as Contextual Adaptation

An alternative argument views these practices as legitimate expressions of contextualization. Proponents of this perspective contend that African Christianity cannot simply replicate Western forms of faith but must engage indigenous worldviews in ways that make the gospel culturally intelligible. From this viewpoint, migration reflects not compromise but the natural process through which the gospel takes root in new cultural soil. The challenge is not to eliminate cultural practices but to transform them through biblical critique (Anderson, 1992; Mukuka, 2020). Mukuka's (2020) research on funeral rituals in Zambia demonstrates that many Adventist members, fearing spirits of the dead, participate in traditional funeral practices aimed at protecting them from spirit attacks, suggesting that contextual mission must address these deep-seated fears.

Argument Three: Ecclesial Migration as Pastoral Dissatisfaction

A third argument, emerging more recently, suggests that ecclesial migration reflects dissatisfaction with pastoral responsiveness rather than theological disagreement. The viewpoint posits that a deficiency in addressing existential anxieties among church congregants, especially those associated with witchcraft, illness, and spiritual assaults, results in members gravitating towards communities providing more substantive pastoral care. From

this viewpoint, migration is not primarily about theology but about pastoral practice (Chiinya, 2022; Lumwe, 2017).

Positioning the Present Study

The findings of the present study engage all three arguments while contributing most significantly to the third. Participants' narratives challenge the syncretism thesis by demonstrating that migration was not accompanied by rejection of Christian doctrine. They simultaneously challenge simplistic contextualization arguments by revealing that migration was less about cultural adaptation than about pastoral experience. The study thus extends the pastoral dissatisfaction argument by showing that what participants sought was not alternative theology but what this study conceptualizes as spiritual security.

2.5 Ellen G. White's Writings on Evil Spiritual Forces

The writings of Ellen G. White provide an important theological resource for understanding spiritual warfare and protection from evil forces. Bruce L. Bauer's (2019) study examines how White's writings explain the workings of evil spiritual powers and the protection available to believers. Bauer demonstrates that White consistently affirmed the reality of spiritual conflict while emphasizing the believer's security in Christ.

Joseph Mutune Ndisya's (2015) dissertation found that there were no biblical or Ellen G. White writings that justify the fear of evil spiritual powers. According to the Kamba worldview, however, it was found that a Christian must replace his or her worldview with a Bible-based worldview. This finding reinforces the importance of worldview transformation in Adventist discipleship.

Ellen White's writings consistently affirm that God's people need not fear evil spiritual forces because they are protected by the power of God. In commenting on King Saul's visit to the Witch of Endor, White underlines that the purpose of the adversary was to destroy God's people through sorcery and that Satan desires to use such practices to destroy God's people. Her writings emphasize that believers find security not in magical protection but in their relationship with God and their adherence to His Word.

2.6 Missiological Responses to Spiritual Fears in the Zambian Adventist Context

Recent scholarship has made significant contributions to understanding the missiological challenges facing the Adventist Church in Zambia, particularly regarding the persistence of spiritual fears among members. Studies have examined how traditional beliefs concerning spirits of the dead, witchcraft, and spiritual causality continue to influence the religious practices of Adventist members, even after they have formally joined the church. Research conducted among Mwami Church members in Zambia demonstrates that many Adventists, fearing spirits of the dead, participate in traditional funeral practices aimed at protecting them from spiritual attacks (Mukuka, 2020). This finding reveals that contextual mission in Zambia must address the deep-seated fears that continue to shape believers' religious practices, even after formal conversion.

The scholarship in this area emphasizes that training programs are needed to enable Zambian Adventists to perform the tasks of contextualization effectively in relation to death and death rituals (Mukuka, 2020). This emphasis on contextual training for pastors and church leaders aligns with broader missiological literature that calls for intentional preparation of ministers to engage members' lived realities without compromising biblical integrity. The influence of existential fears on the religious behavior of Adventist members, despite their formal adherence to biblical teachings, is further emphasized by the research. These fears, which include concerns about ancestral spirits, witchcraft, and other spiritual forces, remain significant in shaping the practices and beliefs of these individuals.

2.7 Practical Theology and Pastoral Presence: Broadening the Conversation

While much of the missiological literature focuses on cultural engagement and theological adaptation, scholarship in practical theology and pastoral care offers additional resources for understanding ecclesial migration. Gerkin (1997) emphasizes that pastoral care must attend to the "lived experience" of believers, recognizing that theological reflection emerges from concrete situations of suffering and uncertainty. McNeill

(1998) argues that pastoral presence characterized by the willingness of ministers to remain with believers through periods of crisis constitutes a primary means through which God's care becomes visible. This perspective resonates with the present study's finding that relational presence was decisive in shaping participants' perceptions of spiritual credibility.

2.8 Research Gap and Conceptual Orientation

The foregoing review demonstrates that contemporary scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of African worldviews, Spirit Churches, contextual mission, Adventist responses to witchcraft, and the contributions of key scholars such as Bauer, Onongha, Lumwe, Chiinya, and Mukuka. Nevertheless, an important gap remains. Existing studies explain why beliefs concerning witchcraft persist among Christians and how contextual mission engages indigenous cultures, yet they provide comparatively limited explanation of how perceptions of pastoral responsiveness influence ecclesial migration among believers who continue to affirm orthodox Christian doctrine.

This study addresses that gap by examining ecclesial migration through the lived experiences of Seventh-day Adventist members in rural Zambia. Rather than treating migration primarily as evidence of syncretism or theological decline, it investigates how believers evaluate the church's capacity to mediate God's protecting presence during periods of existential fear. Building upon these empirical findings, and engaging the three debates outlined above, the article develops the Spiritual Security Framework (SSF) as a contextual missiological lens for interpreting the relationship between pastoral ministry, spiritual assurance, and ecclesial commitment. In doing so, it seeks not to replace existing theories of contextualization or critical contextualization but to complement them by highlighting the pastoral mediation of biblical truth within contexts shaped by enduring spiritual worldviews.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of Seventh-day Adventist members who had either migrated or contemplated migrating to Spirit Churches because of fears associated with witchcraft. Phenomenology was selected over grounded theory because the purpose of the study was not to generate a theory from data but to understand how participants interpreted and made meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology focuses on the essence of lived experience, making it particularly appropriate for examining how participants understood spiritual threats and how those understandings influenced their ecclesial decisions.

Research Setting: Kaumba Mission District

Kaumba Mission District, the setting for this study, is located in Moomba Constituency within Monze District, Southern Province of Zambia. The district is predominantly rural, with subsistence and small-scale commercial agriculture constituting the principal source of livelihood for most households. According to the 2022 Zambia Population and Housing Census, the district has an estimated population of 34,561 people. The area is characterized by dispersed rural settlements, strong kinship networks, and enduring traditional cultural practices that continue to shape community life, social relationships, and religious experience.

The religious landscape of Kaumba Mission District is both pluralistic and predominantly Christian, comprising several historic mission churches, African Initiated Churches (AICs), and Pentecostal movements. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination in the district, with more than 30 congregations serving an estimated 12,000 members. Other established Christian traditions include the New Apostolic Church, the Salvation Army, and numerous Pentecostal churches, all of which contribute to the district's diverse ecclesiastical environment.

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church represents one of the major Protestant denominations in the district, reporting approximately 6,524 baptized members organized into 47 congregations. The Adventist presence in

Kaumba is historically significant within the development of Adventism in Zambia. Following the establishment of Rusangu Mission in 1905, the Adventist Church expanded throughout Southern Province through the establishment of outlying schools that gradually developed into mission stations and organized mission districts. According to the Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook, Demu and Munenga were established in 1930, Kaumba and Nadezwe in 1934, Bweengwa, Dimbwe, and Kazungula in 1935, Mujika in 1941, Namwala in 1946, and Nteme in 1954 (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1930–1954; Moonga, 2023). Kaumba therefore occupies an important place in the historical expansion of Adventist mission in Southern Zambia and has served for more than nine decades as a centre for evangelism, education, pastoral ministry, and community development.

Despite its long-established Adventist heritage, the district faces significant pastoral challenges. At the time of this study, only one ordained minister was responsible for providing pastoral oversight to all 47 congregations, representing approximately 6,524 church members. This pastor-to-member ratio of approximately 1:6,524 presents considerable logistical constraints in a geographically dispersed rural district, where congregations are separated by long travelling distances and limited transportation infrastructure. Consequently, many congregations receive pastoral visitation only periodically, with some members reporting contact with an ordained pastor only once every several months. The day-to-day spiritual care of congregations therefore depends largely upon the ministry of locally elected church elders.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual assigns elders an important pastoral role within the life of the local church. Elders are instructed to “shepherd the flock” (1 Peter 5:2), to visit the sick, pray with families, counsel members, encourage spiritual growth, and, in the absence of the pastor, provide pastoral leadership to the congregation (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2025). However, the practical implementation of this elder-based pastoral system varies considerably across congregations. While some elders actively engage in visitation, counseling, and intercessory ministry, others have limited pastoral training, insufficient confidence, or competing occupational responsibilities that constrain their pastoral involvement. Consequently, the quality and frequency of pastoral care differ substantially from one congregation to another.

This institutional context is particularly significant for the present study because it provides an important structural explanation for participants' perceptions of pastoral inadequacy. Rather than reflecting individual ministerial failure alone, participants' experiences should also be understood within the broader realities of limited pastoral personnel, extensive geographical coverage, and uneven lay pastoral capacity. These structural conditions help explain why some believers perceive that their existential fears receive more immediate and sustained attention within Spirit Churches than within their own ecclesial tradition.

Alongside these historic denominations, 14 Spirit Churches operate within the district, collectively serving approximately 3,000 households. Spirit Churches typically employ highly participatory forms of worship in which extended prayer, prophecy, fasting, divine healing, testimonies, and deliverance ministries constitute central components of congregational life. These practices provide immediate and tangible responses to experiences of suffering and reinforce members' perceptions that spiritual threats are being actively confronted. Consequently, many believers regard these churches as possessing greater spiritual efficacy than ecclesial traditions whose pastoral responses are perceived to be primarily doctrinal, liturgical, or instructional. The coexistence of these diverse Christian traditions creates an important context for examining ecclesial migration and competing understandings of spiritual protection.

Although Kaumba has experienced more than ninety years of continuous Adventist ministry, beliefs concerning witchcraft, spiritual causality, ancestral influence, and supernatural protection continue to shape the worldview of many community members. These beliefs frequently influence how illness, unexplained death, persistent poverty, infertility, family conflict, crop failure, and other forms of misfortune are interpreted, often leading individuals to seek religious communities perceived to possess greater spiritual efficacy in addressing existential threats. The simultaneous presence of a historically established Adventist community, numerous Spirit Churches, and several other Christian traditions makes Kaumba Mission District an especially appropriate setting for investigating why some Seventh-day Adventists migrate to Spirit Churches despite continuing to affirm the core doctrines of the Adventist faith. This unique socio-religious environment provides an information-rich context for exploring participants' lived experiences of existential fear, perceptions of pastoral responsiveness, and the search for spiritual security that underpins the present study.

Participant Selection

This study employed **purposive sampling**, complemented by **snowball sampling**, to recruit participants whose experiences were directly relevant to the research questions. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study sought information-rich cases involving individuals who had personally experienced the phenomenon under investigation rather than a statistically representative sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Initial participants were identified through local church networks and community contacts, after which snowball sampling enabled the identification of additional participants who met the inclusion criteria but might otherwise have been difficult to access due to the sensitive nature of discussions surrounding witchcraft and church migration.

Ten participants were recruited, comprising six women and four men between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-five years. Five participants had migrated from the Seventh-day Adventist Church to Spirit Churches within the previous two years, while five remained active Seventh-day Adventists but acknowledged that they had seriously contemplated leaving because they believed Spirit Churches provided greater protection against witchcraft and other perceived spiritual threats.

The decision to conclude recruitment after ten interviews was guided by the principle of **information power** rather than numerical saturation (Malterud et al., 2016). Information power proposes that the more specific the study aim, the greater the specificity of participant experiences, the stronger the theoretical foundation, and the richer the quality of interview dialogue, the fewer participants are required. Because this study focused on a narrowly defined phenomenon involving individuals with direct lived experience of ecclesial migration or contemplation of migration, each interview generated substantial depth and conceptual richness. By the tenth interview, no substantially new experiential dimensions relevant to the study objectives were emerging, indicating that sufficient information power had been achieved to answer the research questions.

It is important to emphasize that the purpose of this phenomenological investigation was **not to estimate the prevalence** of ecclesial migration among Seventh-day Adventists, nor to produce statistically generalizable findings. Rather, the objective was to develop a rich understanding of how participants interpreted their experiences of spiritual insecurity, pastoral care, and church affiliation within their particular socio-cultural context.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between April-May 2026. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted primarily in Tonga, the participants' preferred language. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were subsequently translated into English by a bilingual research assistant. To ensure accuracy, a different bilingual individual performed back-translation on a sample of 20% of the transcripts, comparing the back-translated versions with the original English translations. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, ensuring the fidelity of the translated data (van Nes et al., 2010).

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). The analysis employed a hybrid approach—primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, while also drawing on existing theoretical frameworks to interpret the findings. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and coding the data, facilitating systematic comparison across participants.

Researcher Reflexivity

The researchers are Seventh-day Adventist theologians and ministers with extensive pastoral and teaching experience in the Zambian context. To enhance reflexivity, the researchers maintained reflective field notes throughout the study, documenting emerging assumptions, personal responses, and interpretive decisions during data collection and analysis (Finlay, 2002).

Trustworthiness

The quality of this qualitative inquiry was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of **credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability**.

Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, in-depth interviews, member checking with three participants, and continuous comparison of emerging interpretations with the interview data. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding procedures, theme development, and analytical reflections throughout the research process.

Confirmability was promoted through researcher reflexivity, whereby reflective field notes and analytic memos were maintained to identify potential researcher assumptions and minimize undue influence on interpretation. The collaborative involvement of multiple researchers further strengthened analytical rigor by allowing discussion and refinement of emerging themes.

Transferability was addressed through the provision of **thick description** rather than statistical representativeness. Detailed descriptions of the research setting, participant characteristics, cultural context, ecclesiastical environment, and pastoral realities of Kaumba Mission District enable readers to determine the extent to which the findings may be applicable to comparable contexts within Zambia and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, the findings are intended to support **analytical transferability** rather than statistical generalization.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection commenced. Participants received detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview. Pseudonyms were assigned to all interview transcripts, and identifying information was removed during transcription.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis revealed five interrelated themes that explain why some Seventh-day Adventist members migrated or seriously contemplated migrating to Spirit Churches.

Theme One: Witchcraft as an Existential Reality

A dominant finding across all interviews was that participants regarded witchcraft not as folklore or superstition but as an unquestioned reality embedded within everyday life. Every participant spoke about witchcraft as an active force capable of influencing health, family relationships, agriculture, employment, education, and economic well-being. One participant explained:

"In our villages, witchcraft is not something people debate. It is something people experience. When a healthy person suddenly becomes seriously ill or when repeated misfortunes happen in one family, people immediately begin asking who might be behind it." (Participant 4, Female, 52 years)

Another participant reflected:

"Doctors may explain sickness, but many people still ask why that sickness came to this particular person. We believe there are spiritual causes behind many things that happen." (Participant 2, Male, 45 years)

A third participant added:

"Even those who have gone to school and learned about science still go to the prophet when their child is dying. They know there is more than what the eye can see." (Participant 6, Female, 42 years)

These narratives illustrate that participants interpreted suffering through an integrated worldview in which physical and spiritual realities interacted continuously. Importantly, participants did not perceive belief in witchcraft as incompatible with Christian faith. Instead, they understood Scripture itself as affirming the reality of supernatural conflict between the kingdom of God and the forces of evil.

Theme Two: Perceived Pastoral Inadequacy Within the Adventist Church

Although participants consistently affirmed their appreciation for Adventist doctrine, they frequently expressed disappointment regarding what they perceived as insufficient pastoral engagement with issues related to witchcraft and spiritual insecurity. One participant observed:

“The pastor teaches the Bible very well, but when someone says they are being attacked spiritually, the answer is often simply, ‘Keep praying.’ People need someone to stay with them, pray with them, and help them through that experience.” (Participant 7, Female, 38 years)

Another participant recalled:

“When my family experienced one problem after another, church members encouraged us, but nobody really walked with us through those difficult months. At the Spirit Church, they kept visiting us until we felt that God had answered.” (Participant 5, Male, 60 years)

A third participant explained:

“I went to the pastor when my children were sick, one after another. He prayed with me, but then he left. At the Spirit Church, the prophet stayed the whole night praying until morning. That made me feel that God was listening.” (Participant 1, Female, 46 years)

These accounts reveal an important distinction between theological affirmation and pastoral experience. Participants evaluated churches not only according to doctrinal fidelity but also according to pastoral responsiveness. Churches were considered spiritually credible when leaders remained relationally present during crises.

Theme Three: Visible Spiritual Ministry as Evidence of Divine Presence

Spirit Churches were consistently described as communities where God’s power was experienced visibly through prophecy, healing, deliverance, extended prayer, and communal participation. One participant explained:

“When you arrive at the prophet’s place, people begin praying immediately. They ask questions about your family, your problems, and they continue praying until everyone believes God has intervened.” (Participant 9, Female, 47 years)

Another participant remarked:

“They don’t only tell you to have faith. They demonstrate faith by staying with you until you have peace.” (Participant 3, Male, 55 years)

Participants measured spiritual authority less by institutional office than by relational engagement. Prophets were regarded as spiritually credible because they were perceived to enter directly into believers’ experiences of suffering, remaining present until reassurance had been restored. While Anderson (1992) rightly emphasizes prophetic ministry, the present findings suggest that participants were drawn less by prophecy itself than by the relational availability accompanying prophetic ministry.

Theme Four: “God Is More Powerful, but the Prophet Is Closer”: The Paradox of Faith and Proximity

Among all the themes emerging from the interviews, none more clearly captured the tension underlying ecclesial migration than the statement repeatedly expressed by participants:

“God is more powerful, but the prophet is closer.”

One participant explained:

“I know God is greater than every witch. That has never changed. But when something happens in my family, the prophet is there immediately. He comes, prays, fasts with us, and stays until we have peace.” (Participant 6, Female, 42 years)

Another participant reflected:

“The Adventist Church teaches us to trust God, and I do trust Him. But during difficult times I also need someone who will walk with me. The prophet feels closer because he shares the burden.” (Participant 10, Male, 35 years)

These narratives reveal an important distinction between belief in God’s sovereignty and experience of God’s nearness. Participants were not abandoning Adventist doctrine; instead, they sought pastoral relationships through which theological convictions became experientially meaningful.

Theme Five: Seeking Spiritual Security Rather Than Theological Alternatives

Throughout the interviews, participants consistently rejected the suggestion that their migration reflected dissatisfaction with Adventist theology. Instead, they described themselves as searching for what they repeatedly characterized as peace, assurance, confidence, protection, and spiritual safety. One participant explained:

“I never stopped believing the Bible. I still believe the Sabbath. I still believe Jesus is coming again. What I wanted was somewhere I could feel secure when my family was suffering.” (Participant 8, Male, 51 years)

Another participant remarked:

“People think we leave because we no longer believe Adventist teaching. That is not true. We leave because fear makes us look for help.” (Participant 3, Male, 55 years)

Participants were not searching for a different theology but for a different pastoral experience. Their decisions reflected an effort to reconcile unwavering belief in God’s sovereignty with an equally urgent desire to experience His protecting presence within everyday life.

Figure 1: Preliminary Conceptual Model of Ecclesial Migration

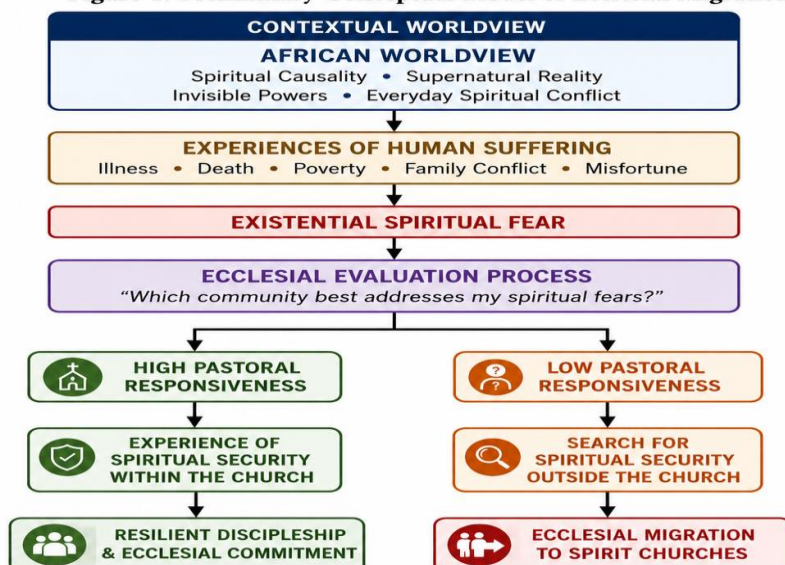


Figure 1. Preliminary Conceptual Model of Ecclesial Migration. This model illustrates the decision-making process through which believers interpret experiences of suffering within an African worldview characterized by spiritual causality. Existential fear prompts an evaluation of the church’s pastoral responsiveness. Where believers experience sustained pastoral care, they develop spiritual security that strengthens resilient discipleship and ecclesial commitment. Where pastoral responses are perceived as inadequate, believers continue searching for spiritual security, increasing the likelihood of migration to Spirit Churches.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the migration of some Seventh-day Adventists to Spirit Churches in rural Zambia cannot be adequately explained through conventional explanations emphasizing doctrinal instability, inadequate biblical knowledge, or simple religious syncretism. Rather than representing theological defection, participants' narratives consistently point toward a search for experiential assurance within contexts characterized by existential fear.

Beyond Syncretism

Participants rarely described themselves as abandoning Christianity or replacing biblical faith with traditional religion. Instead, they consistently interpreted their movement toward Spirit Churches as an effort to strengthen their Christian lives during periods of profound uncertainty. This observation challenges assumptions that ecclesial migration necessarily indicates theological decline. Instead, it suggests that believers often evaluate churches according to their perceived ability to mediate God's presence within situations of suffering.

The findings therefore extend previous scholarship by proposing that ecclesial migration should be understood simultaneously as a theological, pastoral, and relational phenomenon. While theology provides the intellectual framework of faith, pastoral ministry determines how that framework is experienced within everyday life.

Existential Fear as a Missiological Category

Participants' fears emerged from lived experiences rather than abstract beliefs. Illness, repeated bereavement, unexplained economic hardship, family conflict, and community narratives concerning witchcraft created social realities that profoundly shaped religious decision-making. Recognizing existential fear as a legitimate missiological category acknowledges that effective mission begins with people's lived realities before guiding them toward biblical transformation.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus consistently encountered individuals within their experiences of suffering before inviting them into deeper discipleship. When Jesus calmed the storm, He addressed the disciples' fear directly: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40). He healed before He instructed, comforted before He corrected, and restored before He commissioned. His ministry therefore demonstrates that pastoral engagement and theological proclamation are complementary rather than competing dimensions of Christian mission.

From Doctrinal Orthodoxy to Pastoral/Elders Orthopraxy

The repeated statement, "God is more powerful, but the prophet is closer," illustrates with remarkable clarity that participants did not doubt God's power; they doubted whether the church made that power experientially accessible. Consequently, the issue confronting the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not theological insufficiency but pastoral mediation.

This insight invites a renewed understanding of pastoral orthopraxy. Orthopraxy should not be understood as replacing orthodoxy but as expressing it. Theology achieves its fullest credibility when it is embodied through compassionate ministry, sustained pastoral/elders presence, and communities that visibly demonstrate the love and protection of God. The apostle Paul's description of the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27) suggests that believers collectively embody Christ's presence to the world.

Pastoral/Elders Presence as the Embodiment of Mission

The interviews repeatedly identified relational presence as the defining characteristic distinguishing Spirit Churches from participants' experiences within the Adventist Church. Prophets were remembered not primarily because they performed miracles but because they visited homes, prayed persistently, fasted alongside families, remained available throughout crises, and accompanied believers until reassurance had been restored.

This understanding resonates with the incarnation itself. The Gospel of John declares that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). God’s redemptive mission was accomplished not through distant proclamation alone but through His presence among humanity. Likewise, pastoral ministry becomes missional when it embodies God’s nearness among communities experiencing fear and suffering. The apostle Paul modelled such presence, declaring to the Thessalonians, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well” (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

Extending Contemporary Missiology

The present study contributes to broader missiological scholarship by extending existing conversations concerning contextualization. Scholars have long argued that Christian mission requires faithful engagement with culture while maintaining biblical integrity. The findings of this study affirm this conviction but suggest that contextualization should be understood not only as cultural adaptation but also as pastoral mediation.

In other words, contextual mission involves more than communicating biblical truth in culturally understandable language. It also involves enabling believers to experience that truth through pastoral relationships that address the existential realities shaping everyday life. This insight builds on the work of scholars such as Mukuka (2020), who has demonstrated that contextual mission in Zambia must address the deep-seated fears that continue to shape believers' religious practices.

THE SPIRITUAL SECURITY FRAMEWORK

6.1 Defining Spiritual Security

Drawing inductively upon the phenomenological findings, this article defines spiritual security as:

The lived assurance that God’s protecting presence is experienced as biblically grounded, pastorally mediated, communally affirmed, and personally accessible amid perceived spiritual threats.

This definition intentionally integrates theological conviction with pastoral experience. Spiritual security is neither emotional reassurance detached from biblical truth nor dependence upon charismatic personalities. Rather, it represents the practical appropriation of biblical faith within the ordinary experiences of Christian life.

6.2 The Four Pillars

The empirical findings indicate that spiritual security develops through the interaction of four mutually reinforcing dimensions:

1. Biblical Assurance. Participants consistently desired confidence grounded in Scripture rather than magical protection. As Ndisya (2015) demonstrated, there are no biblical writings that justify fear of evil spiritual powers. Instead, Scripture consistently calls believers to trust in God’s protection. The apostle Paul writes, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

2. Relational Pastoral/Elders Presence. The significance of pastoral presence was frequently highlighted by participants, emphasizing activities such as home visits and family prayer. Intentional listening emerged as a key component, coupled with the practice of compassionate accompaniment. Furthermore, persistent intercession was recognized as an essential element of pastoral care. The statement, “The prophet is closer,” should be interpreted primarily as a commentary on relational ministry rather than prophetic authority. The apostle Paul modelled such presence: “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well” (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

3. Worshipping Community. Participants’ narratives demonstrate that spiritual confidence develops within relationships rather than isolation. Corporate worship, prayer groups, elder visitation, and small-group fellowship reinforce the conviction that God’s people participate together in His protecting care. The writer of Hebrews instructs believers, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

4. Contextual Discipleship. Believers desire biblical teaching that directly addresses the realities they encounter within everyday life such as suffering, spiritual warfare, witchcraft, fear, hope, prayer, and Christian assurance. Such teaching enables believers to reinterpret their lived realities through the biblical narrative of redemption. The apostle Paul’s approach provides a model: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

CONTEXTUAL REALITY

Fig 2



Figure 2. The Spiritual Security Framework (SSF): A Contextual Missiological Model.

The framework illustrates how experiences of existential fear, interpreted within African worldviews characterized by spiritual causality, lead believers to seek spiritual security. It proposes that biblical assurance, pastoral/elders presence, worshipping community, and contextual discipleship function together to mediate confidence in God’s protecting presence. This confidence strengthens resilient Christian discipleship, reinforces ecclesial commitment, and supports faithful contextual mission.

6.4 Predictive Capacity

Based on the empirical findings and theological foundations of the SSF, the following testable proposition emerges:

Churches characterized by high levels of biblical assurance, relational pastoral presence, worshipping community, and contextual discipleship are likely to cultivate higher levels of spiritual security and lower levels of ecclesial migration driven by existential fear.

6.5 Implications and Future Research Agenda

The findings invite renewed reflection on the nature of Christian ministry within African contexts where beliefs concerning witchcraft and spiritual causality continue to influence believers' lived experiences. The Spiritual Security Framework suggests that resilient Christian discipleship is strengthened not only through doctrinal instruction but also through sustained pastoral presence, communal support, and contextual biblical discipleship. Accordingly, Adventist ecclesiology should increasingly emphasize the church as a community in which believers experience God's protecting presence through compassionate relationships, intentional visitation, intercessory prayer, mutual encouragement, and faithful biblical teaching.

The findings also have important implications for ministerial formation. Pastors, elders, Bible workers, and other church leaders should receive intentional preparation in contextual missiology, pastoral theology, pastoral counselling, spiritual formation, family ministry, trauma-informed pastoral care, and biblical approaches to spiritual warfare. Such preparation would better equip church leaders to engage existential fears without compromising biblical faithfulness.

Although the present study provides a contextual understanding of ecclesial migration within one rural district of Zambia, further research is required to examine the broader applicability of the Spiritual Security Framework. Future studies should employ larger and more diverse samples drawn from multiple provinces of Zambia as well as other African countries to determine whether similar patterns emerge across different cultural and ecclesiastical contexts.

Comparative qualitative and mixed-methods studies involving three groups of participants would be particularly valuable: (1) members who have migrated to Spirit Churches, (2) members who have seriously contemplated migration but remained within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and (3) members who have never considered leaving despite experiencing similar spiritual concerns. Such comparisons would help identify protective factors that strengthen ecclesial resilience and clarify the mechanisms through which pastoral care influences long-term church commitment.

Future investigations should also extend beyond pastoral ministry to examine how broader socio-economic and structural variables shape experiences of spiritual insecurity. Factors including poverty, unemployment, healthcare accessibility, educational attainment, family relationships, community support systems, social capital, psychological resilience, and local patterns of religious interaction may significantly influence religious decision-making and should therefore be explored through interdisciplinary collaboration involving theology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and public health.

Finally, because the Spiritual Security Framework was developed inductively from qualitative data, future quantitative and mixed-methods studies are encouraged to operationalize its four dimensions—Biblical Assurance, Relational Pastoral/Elders Presence, Worshipping Community, and Contextual Discipleship—and evaluate their relationships with perceived spiritual security, ecclesial commitment, and migration intentions. Such empirical testing would further refine the framework and contribute to its development as a robust missiological model for understanding ecclesial commitment within African Christianity.

6.6 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the research was conducted within a single Seventh-day Adventist Mission District in rural Zambia using a phenomenological qualitative design involving ten participants. Consequently, the findings are intended to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences rather than statistically representative conclusions about the prevalence of ecclesial migration among Seventh-day Adventists or African Christians more broadly.

Second, the study focused specifically on individuals who had either migrated to Spirit Churches or had seriously contemplated doing so because of concerns related to witchcraft and spiritual insecurity. Although this sampling strategy was appropriate for exploring the phenomenon under investigation, it did not include a comparison group of members who remained committed to the Seventh-day Adventist Church despite experiencing similar

existential fears. Such comparative perspectives would provide valuable insights into the protective factors that strengthen resilience and long-term ecclesial commitment.

Third, while the study identified pastoral responsiveness as a central factor shaping participants' perceptions of spiritual security, it did not systematically investigate other contextual influences that may also contribute to ecclesial migration. Variables such as economic hardship, access to healthcare, educational attainment, family dynamics, social networks, psychological resilience, and broader community structures may interact with religious beliefs in complex ways that warrant further investigation.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the present study. Rather, they reflect the intentional scope of phenomenological inquiry, whose purpose is to illuminate the meanings participants attribute to their experiences. The findings therefore offer an analytically grounded conceptual framework that can inform subsequent comparative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research across diverse African contexts.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine why some Seventh-day Adventists in Kaumba Mission District, Zambia, migrate to Spirit Churches despite affirming God's supreme authority over evil. Employing a phenomenological qualitative approach, the study found that this ecclesial migration is motivated less by theological disagreement than by a search for spiritual security in contexts where witchcraft is experienced as an existential reality. Participants consistently affirmed the authority of Scripture, the lordship of Christ, and the core doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, thereby challenging interpretations that explain migration primarily in terms of doctrinal decline or religious syncretism. Rather, their narratives reveal that believers evaluate church communities according to their perceived ability to mediate God's protecting presence amid suffering, uncertainty, and fear. Relational pastoral presence, sustained communal prayer, compassionate accompaniment, and contextual biblical teaching emerged as critical factors that cultivate confidence in God's care. The recurring expression, "God is more powerful, but the prophet is closer," succinctly captures the tension between theological conviction and lived pastoral experience that underlies this phenomenon.

The principal contribution of this study is the development of the **Spiritual Security Framework (SSF)**, a contextual missiological model for understanding ecclesial migration within African Christianity. The framework proposes that resilient Christian discipleship is strengthened when four mutually reinforcing dimensions—**Biblical Assurance, Relational Pastoral/Elders Presence, Worshipping Community, and Contextual Discipleship**—function together to foster believers' confidence in God's protecting presence. In this way, the study extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that ecclesial commitment is shaped not only by theological conviction but also by the manner in which biblical truth is embodied through faithful pastoral ministry, supportive Christian community, and contextually relevant discipleship.

The findings should, however, be interpreted within the methodological boundaries of phenomenological qualitative research. The purpose of this study was to illuminate the lived experiences and meanings participants attributed to ecclesial migration rather than to establish statistical prevalence or claim generalizability across all Adventist communities. The Spiritual Security Framework should therefore be understood as an empirically grounded conceptual model developed from participants' narratives and intended to stimulate further scholarly investigation. Future research employing comparative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and multi-site designs—including participants from different regions, denominations, and cultural settings, as well as comparisons between members who migrate and those who remain committed despite similar existential concerns—will be essential for evaluating, refining, and extending the framework. Such studies should also examine the influence of broader contextual factors, including economic hardship, healthcare access, education, social networks, and psychological resilience, in shaping perceptions of spiritual security and ecclesial commitment.

Ultimately, the future of Christian mission in Africa depends not only on the church's ability to proclaim and defend biblical truth but also on its capacity to embody that truth through ministries of faithful presence, compassionate accompaniment, sustained intercessory care, and contextual discipleship. By integrating theological orthodoxy with pastoral orthopraxy, the church becomes more than a guardian of doctrine; it becomes a living witness to the protecting, healing, and transforming presence of the risen Christ within communities

facing the realities of fear, suffering, and spiritual uncertainty. Such a vision offers a constructive pathway for strengthening resilient discipleship and faithful Christian witness throughout Africa.

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