

**COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MARRIAGE, RAIN MAKING AND LIVELIHOOD  
RITUALS IN CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

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# COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MARRIAGE, RAIN MAKING AND LIVELIHOOD RITUALS IN CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

## Introduction

Marriage unites spouses and families among the adherents of African Traditional Religion and Christianity. Christians endeavor to make their homes little heavens on earth by providing premarital education for the youth during courtship where the ethics of successful marriages are taught<sup>1</sup>. Among the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe, all family members have a part in the rituals of marriage. The parents of the couple together with the other relatives play important roles in the preparations and in the marriage itself. According to Robert Cameron, “In Africa the rituals for marriage take place over long periods of time”<sup>2</sup> These rituals include the payment of *lobola* (bride price), bidding farewell, *isithundu*, counseling sessions, including the final departure of the bride through her father’s kraal not the gate. In the same manner livelihood and rain making rituals are carried out by both Christians and adherents of African Traditional Religion at designated times in the year to celebrate their successes or to fight a common enemy,

## Marriage Rituals

In the original Ndebele culture from Zimbabwe, *lobola* was not regarded as an asset. It was not an issue talked about during marriage preparations. The subject of *lobola* only came up after the wife had given birth to children. It was then that the husband gave the in-laws cattle or goats in appreciation for what his wife was doing for him. Then the number of cattle was not dictated by the in laws. Wallace Bozongwana says that, “The man would give according to his

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth & Philemon Amanze. *Become A Better Family-Lessons from Great Couples to Improve Your Homes Daily* (Lagos: Jamiro Press Link 2014), pp. 1-79

<sup>2</sup> Cameron Mitchell Robert. *African Primal Regions* (Texas: Argus Communications 1979), 37.

discretion the cattle that he deemed reasonable for his appreciation.<sup>3</sup> According to custom, before he gave this appreciation, the children belonged to the wife's parents. If he did not show appreciation until they grew up, he had no right to his daughter's bride price, and it would go to his in-laws as compensation. However if he gave *lobola* appreciation there would be great jubilation in the bride's home. After this, the son in-law would be greatly respected and held in high esteem.

In trying to meet the community needs as a contemporary Adventist minister it is important to uphold that which is good in the culture. There is a biblical example of how appreciation was shown in the bible. That is the story of Isaac and Rebekah. Genesis 24:53 says that, Abraham's servant, "...also gave valuable presents to her mother and brother". Here we see Abraham sending gifts to appreciate the bride's family for the gift of their daughter. The contemporary Adventist ministers may meet the communal needs by guiding the church members through teaching them not to make bride price a fundraising project, asking for too much money or too many cattles. Rather, by following the biblical example, the bride price will be an appreciation. The bride's actual price cannot be measured by the number of cattle but by the blood that Jesus shed at Calvary. Rather than being bought or sold, the bride should be appreciated. The communal needs may also be met through a ministerial ritual to bless the family as they send off their daughter, following the biblical pattern of Rebecca's family. Pastoral counseling for the families and communities can also be given here.

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<sup>3</sup> Wallace Bozongwana, *Ndebele Religion and Customs* (Gweru: Mambo Press 2000), 23.

## **Farewell Ritual<sup>4</sup>**

Another subsidiary ritual surrounding marriage practiced in Matebeleland was that of bidding farewell (*Ukuvalelisa*). It is still practiced today. This is done a month or two before the wedding takes place. The bride and the aunt will visit every home in the community to bid them farewell. The community receives them and gives gifts and pre-marital counseling especially to the intending bride. Some of the researchers had the special privilege of participating in this ritual before marriage. They received enriching and valuable counsels and received memorable good wishes from the community. In addition, the gifts helped them in starting their new homes. The gifts usually come in cash or kind. It is during this time that those who believe in African traditional medicine receive medicines which are believed would strengthen their homes.

In meeting the African rituals and community needs, contemporary Adventist ministers may encourage church members to plan a program where they may meet together with the community and offer guided advice to those getting married. They can still give them gifts minus the inexplicable medicines for home strengthening. Instead, Biblical teachings must be upheld and prayers given to strengthen the new home. Strong homes are built on Christ. “Except the Lord Builds a house they labor in vain that build it” (Psalms 127:1).

## **Wedding Ritual**

On the wedding day, there is another ritual that is done which particularly involves the bride. The *isithundu* (fecundity ritual) involves the head of the family telling *amadlozi* (ancestral spirits) that their daughter is getting married, soliciting for their blessings and protection.

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Sibanda, a professor from Adventist University, Lusaka, Zambia as well as a research fellow from Solusi University, Zimbabwe supplied the information from the two countries concerned. Linda is from Zambia while her husband (a pastor) is from Zimbabwe. She had been enjoying her marriage for over twelve years.

Fecundity means fruitfulness and fertility, possessing the ability to produce abundantly healthy offsprings.<sup>5</sup> Medicine is prepared and put on a calabash, then on top of the bride's head. The family head turns the calabash on her head using a cooking stick while chanting words of prosperity for the girl. She also repeats some chants after him. In an interview Ebbie Msimanga<sup>6</sup> said the belief is that if this is not done then the marriage would fail.

In the aforementioned research fellow's experience she refused to go through this ritual based on her Christian beliefs. This resulted in threats from the family that her up-coming marriage would break up. More than ten years have passed and the marriage is still intact and she believes it is by God's grace.

Again during this ritual, traditional songs are sung which seek ancestral protection. In trying to reach the African rituals and community needs, the contemporary Adventist ministers may design a ritual where they teach about the Genesis 2:21 and 22 origin of marriage and incorporate appropriately composed and meaningful music. A special prayer can then be offered to God to strengthen the bonds of the coming marriage and give health and fruitfulness in the bride's future married life.

### **Counseling Ritual**

The last ritual done before the girl leaves her home is the ritual of counseling (*ukulaya*). This ritual is done by the elderly ladies. They give strong counsel concerning how the girl should

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<sup>5</sup> Grace Ogot. Trip Down Memory Lane: Celebrating our African historical personalities, discoveries, achievements and eras as proud people with rich culture, traditions and enlightenment spanning many years. <http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com.ng/> and <http://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/fecundity>, accessed 20 April 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Ebbie Msimanga, Sales Lady, Mzilikazi, Interview by the authors, Bulawayo. 12 April 2015.

handle her marriage including her husband's family. In an interview Sisinyana Siso highlighted that, "This rite is important because it prepares the bride for the challenges ahead of her"<sup>7</sup>

In meeting African rituals and community needs the contemporary Adventist ministers should train the church members in the area of Christian counseling so that during such sessions the church members together with the community would give Bible-based counsels to the bride. Further than this, a parallel ritual can also be arranged for the bridegroom. This area is normally neglected and the opportunity lost. Elders and ministers can find empowering participation here.

### **Childbirth Ritual**

Other traditional rituals take place after conception and even during child birth. During pregnancy the expecting mother is expected to drink certain medicines that are believed to assist in opening the passage of the baby at birth. In some cases these medicines include the placenta of a donkey and the skin of a python. Delse Bhebhe was interviewed to share her cultural knowledge with the researchers on this issue<sup>8</sup>.

Adventist minister have an opportunity in this regard to design Christian rituals for teaching expectant mothers the implications of the mother's lifestyle during their pregnancy. Prayer sessions for safe delivery would be included in this ritual, among other things. When the baby is born the placenta and the umbilical cord are separated with a sharp sterilized instrument. Traditionally the majority of Ndebele mothers bury the placenta under the floor of the labor hut. However, some clans dispose the umbilical cord the same way they disposed of the placenta. The

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<sup>7</sup>Sisinyana Siso, Jenda SDA Secondary School Teacher. Interviewed by the authors at Filabusi. 13 April 2015

<sup>8</sup>DelsieBhebhe, Solusi University Janitor, interview by the authors at Bulawayo, 15 April 2015.

Khumalo<sup>9</sup> people take the stub to the river where it may even be eaten by the fish. The mother and the child are secluded for a period of time. People come and kneel at the door and congratulate her saying, “*amhlophe*” which basically means ‘congratulations.’

In meeting African rituals and community needs the Adventist Christian Ministers can take the opportunity to design a ritual where facilitation of training on hygienic ways of midwifery can be arranged. The lessons would include hygienic ways of handling and disposing of the placenta and the umbilical cord. It is obviously not safe to dispose of them into the river where they may contaminate the fish which may be caught by humans for food.

### **The Rain making rituals**

Rain, in the truest perspective of an African traditional mind, is more than a mother or a father and can be understood and appreciated as an equivalent of life itself according to Philemon Nsingo Ndebele, an African Traditional Religions legend in Zimbabwe. Without it the value of this beautiful earth amounts to nothing. Everything unborn yet cannot be born with meaning and everything existing cannot survive for a long time without it.<sup>10</sup> Nsingo says that a couple of decades ago, getting rain was not as problematic as it is experienced today because people in their respective communities knew how to worship God. They did it with reverence and total obedience and they did not undermine their Africanness. He asserts that God is angry

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<sup>9</sup> Part of the traditional Ndebele Royal Family.

<sup>10</sup> Philemon Nsingo, African Traditional Religions Legend, Bulawayo, interviewed by authors, Bulawayo, 20 March 2015

with this modern syncretic arrangement that undermines the covenant he made with the African people, now viewed as evil and uncivilized.<sup>11</sup>

Going on he confirmed that the greatest hindrance and chief contributor of drought nowadays is the shedding of innocent blood among the brethren. In the past when people felt stuck because of lack of rain, the traditional leaders in the community would call everybody under a particular chosen tree where God was believed to be meeting with his people during the time of crises. The leaders would call a priest to cleanse the area and confess the wrongs on behalf of the people. Brewed beer by elderly women who would have passed menopause, would be poured at the stump of the tree and all men would bow their heads and women lie on their side as the priest would be pleading on their behalf.

From there young men of adolescent age would be sent to collect every bird nests on the trees while elderly men would be gathering all bones of dead animals from mountains, valleys and the plains. After burning all the collections the leaders would call for all villagers to contribute some sorghum millets for brewing beer that would be taken to the national shrine for appeasing the spirits.

Meanwhile every home stead would be asked to bring just a handful of their planting seeds to the national shrine at Njelele for blessings. The ceremonies would be conducted at the national shrine for one week and nine tenths of the times, the rains would fall before the *wosanas* (priests) would come back from Njelele. Upon their arrival a day of fasting would be declared as a day of

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*



thanks giving to God and the ancestors and any one found working on this day would either be charged a fine or face eviction from the society if proven to be arrogant.<sup>12</sup>

The Kalanga tribe that is situated in the South West of Zimbabwe valued rain as a gift from God. People and animals depended on it for survival and any sign of lack of it would send the whole community panicking. “ Every year towards the beginning of the rain season, chief Hobodo as a custodian of the Kalanga religion and customs would send a delegation of *amawosana*(priests) to the Njelele shrine to go and ask for some rain from Mwali on behalf of the community”.<sup>13</sup>

The Ndau tribe in Chipinge which is located on the eastern boarder of Zimbabwe believed that drought came as a result of political conflicts between Zanu PF and ZanuNdonga( political parties) between 1965-1980 and also between the chiefs in the quest for power and supremacy. In addition, the West had been accused of tampering with the rainfall in Zimbabwe. This according to some government officials, has led to poor production in maize and other crops within the country in recent years.<sup>14</sup> Every year they would send the clan’s representatives to the shrine to plead for rain from God. Of the representatives sent, *Musikavahnu* was believed to be

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hary Mazinani: Njelele not just a rain-making shrine. <http://kalanga.org/news/njelele-not-just-a-rain-making-shrine/> and File:///C:/Users/Access/Desktop/Africa Traditional Religions\_Religion in Zimbabwe.htm. (Accessed 17-04-15).

<sup>14</sup> Sikhanyso Ndlovu. West Tampering with Our Rainfall. <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-22977-Zanu+PF+shocker+West+stops+Zim+rain/news.aspx> and Archive.lib.msu.edu.juz0240011004pdf.( accessed 17-04-15).

the strongest because his ancestors were considered to be stronger since his surname means hippo an animal that lives in water.<sup>15</sup>

PhathisaNyathi, a Sociologist and a very strong adherent of the African Traditional Religion concurred with Chief Hobodo that the correct timing for sending the *wosanas* to the Njelele shrine for rain request was prior to the rain season and normally in August –September of every year.<sup>16</sup>

### **Seventh-day Adventist’s Rain Making Ritual**

As Mbiti has correctly alluded to the fact that Africans are notoriously religious, Adventist ministry needs a very strong and viable alternative method of unseating and substituting the African ritual of appealing to the ancestors for rain. One method that has been tried and proved substantively, appealing to the community and yielding immediate results in Tsholotsho was started by an Adventist traditional chief by the name of Gampu. It was after his territory had experienced continuous droughts for a number of years and people having conducted faithful traditional rituals but to no avail. He called all his headmen and kraal heads to the chief’s kraal and asked for a way forward since all had been tried to no avail. Dams had gone dry for some time and villagers had lost a substantial number of live stock. The chief asked his subjects if they could allow him to invite a Seventh day Adventist pastor to come and conduct a biblical ritual on behalf of the district together with them. They grudgingly accepted his request. After agreeing on a set date with the local pastor the chief sent word to inform the Conference

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. ( accessed 17-04-15).

<sup>16</sup> [www.sundaynews.co.zw/functionality](http://www.sundaynews.co.zw/functionality) of-african- traditional-religion-atr-defilement of njelele. ( Accessed 17-04-15).

president of this desire to plead with God for intervention in their situation and also to prove that the God of the Bible is the source of everything including rain.

A visiting pastor was sent from the conference to go and meet the community leadership. Supporting prayers were solicited for from colleagues and church members. Community people were asked to bring their seeds to the prayer gathering. Several passages of scripture that pointed to God alone as the source of all blessings and explained the conditions for answered prayers were read. The visitor concluded the ritual by praying for the people, the land , animals and for the seeds and asked the Lord for a good harvest. He challenged them to put away anything that would hinder the Lord from hearing their prayers.

An unprecedented miracle was witnessed that year. Rains came and filled all their dams and people got a bumper harvest outperforming that in many years. Surrounding areas got little harvest compared to the area of the ritual. The following year people gave testimonies of gratitude to the Lord of the Seventh day Adventists and made it an annual event to come together for prayers when the rainy season approaches.<sup>17</sup>

In our endeavor to replace the ATR rituals with the Biblically sound rituals, we need to inform adherents that God has his demands, expectations and values that must be followed as a pre requisite to success.

Supplications must be made to Jehovah alone and not to the idols and the fulfillment of the promise of fruitful seasons depends on people`s asking from God, who will hear their petitions if offered with sincerity and favor, and will give them both the former and the latter rain.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ashely GampuSithole, Chief, Tsholotsho, interview by author, Bulawayo, 20 March 2009.

<sup>18</sup>[www.study.right.org/commentaries/rbc/view.cgi?bk=37&ch==10](http://www.study.right.org/commentaries/rbc/view.cgi?bk=37&ch==10), (Accessed 19-04-15) .

According to *Calvin`s Commentary on The Bible* in relation to Deuteronomy 28: 12 the author says that God`s declaration of His willingness to bless should be known by all and that his capacity alone to bring rain should be esteemed above human efforts and other sources”.<sup>19</sup>The warning as expounded in Deuteronomy 11: 14 suggests that fidelity to the covenant with God must be to the exclusion of other gods if fruitful results are expected. Any form of syncretism results in the withdrawal of blessings including the blessings of rains.<sup>20</sup>

The following texts could also be used to encourage the communities to trust the Lord and in the surety of His divine providences: Jeremiah 14:22, Leviticus 26:4, Genesis 7:4, Exodus 9:33-34, 1Kings 18:41, Ezra 10:0, Job 28:26, Psalm 68:8 and Psalm 135: 7.

### **The Livelihoods Rituals**

Every African family expects its members in the young adults to find sources of income. For an average African wealth thus gained is not for the single benefit of the individual but for the livelihood and the progress of the whole extended family. In Zimbabwe it is not unusual for a normal urban or rural household to be composed of the nuclear family, the wife or husband`s younger siblings and any other relative who may be in need of support. The rural home is usually an extension of the urban home in terms of livelihoods.

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<sup>19</sup>[www.studylight.org/commentaries/cal/view/cgi?=4&ch=28](http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/cal/view/cgi?=4&ch=28), ( Accessed 19-04-15) .

<sup>20</sup>Bob Deffinbaugh. The Life and Times of Elijah the Prophet— Showdown at the Mount Carmel Corral (1 Kings 18:1-46). <https://bible.org/seriespage/10-life-and-times-elijah-prophet-showdown-mount-carmel-coral-1-kings-181-46> & Commentary Critical& Expository On The Whole Bible. [www.studylight.org/commentaries/jfb/view.cgi?bk=4&ch11](http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/jfb/view.cgi?bk=4&ch11), ( Accessed 19-04-15).

In view of this, the family's sources of income are of critical value to the family. Many Christians have found themselves syncretizing in a bid to secure supernatural assistance in maintaining or improving the viability of such economic sources. One survey carried out within the Seventh-day Adventist Church<sup>21</sup>, listed position seeking, position retention, averting ill luck and promotion among the seven top issues that led seventh-day Adventists into spiritualistic activities.<sup>22</sup> The listed issues have an obvious connection to family income generation in Africa. It must be noted that the African traditional worldview does not differentiate so much between the secular and the sacred. This traditional worldview influences Africans as they seek ways to create an income for the support of their families.

Pope Paul VI expressed his recognition that African traditional religious expression makes a link between the living, nature and the world of the invisible spirit. "The presence of God permeates African life and that God is the ultimate cause of all things."<sup>23</sup> No wonder, a vacuum could be created if the newfound faith has no ritual or expression for livelihoods.

Historically, when a Shona clan or family settled in a new area, they prayed to the spirits (*Mhondoro*) for permission and for good will so that rains would fall on their planted crops and they could earn their livelihood. Quoted below is a Shona translated traditional prayer:

*We have entered your country. We are asking you to forward our words to the Magombwe (the great tribal spirit). We thank you very much for allowing us to come into your area and to plant our crops. Keep our crops for us. Give us good rain. We only tell*

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<sup>21</sup> A conference is a section of the Seventh-day Adventist Church organization in an area made up of several districts and served by one administrative office.

<sup>22</sup> Theodore U. Dickson and Timothy Ibrahim, "Impending Journey" in *Seventh-day Adventist Responses to Spiritualism: The Nigerian Experience* (Lagos: Jamiro Press Link), p 149.

<sup>23</sup> [www.africaworld.net/afrel/atrxadocs.htm](http://www.africaworld.net/afrel/atrxadocs.htm) African Traditional Religion in Church Documents by Paul Bekye. Accessed 19/04/2015.

you this because you are the owner of this area. But do not forget to take our words to the Magombwe.<sup>24</sup>

Accordingly, the Shona believe that the *Mhondoro* brings rain and is responsible for the production of good and bountiful crops. “The material needs in Shona life are catered for by the *Mhondoro* (tribal spirit) which ensures the prosperity of the family and their means of livelihood and prevents witches from entering the home”.<sup>25</sup>

As suggested before, Adventist Ministers could offer special prayers to God for his guidance and blessings in the agricultural season. This could be done in addition to appropriate education given on agricultural science as this is so critical to people’s livelihoods in Zimbabwe. This is following Christ’s method of outreach.<sup>26</sup>

When a family member was departing the homestead to go on a long journey (which would include those going out for work in modern times) a prayer ceremony would be held.<sup>27</sup> The minister of the family ritual is the senior male member of the family or *muzukuru* (son of the father’s sister). He offered the ritual prayer while wrapping his head and shoulders in a black cloth (*jira*), half kneeling and clapping his hands with a special pop sound. The whole family would participate and women knelt fully with their hands touching the ground.<sup>28</sup> Already this shows how the one who was venturing out experienced the full support and good wishes of his family, community and higher powers. Gelfand notes that the Shona member of the family could

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<sup>24</sup> M. Gelfand, The Shona Religion, [anweb.lib.msu.edu/DMC/Africa.%20Journals/pdfs/journal%20of%20the%20university5of20Zimbabwe/vol9n1/juz001001005.pdf](http://anweb.lib.msu.edu/DMC/Africa.%20Journals/pdfs/journal%20of%20the%20university5of20Zimbabwe/vol9n1/juz001001005.pdf) accessed 19/04/2015, p38.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid p39

<sup>26</sup> Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing*. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1905), p143.

<sup>27</sup> M. Gelfand, The Shona Religion, [anweb.lib.msu.edu/DMC/Africa.%20Journals/pdfs/journal%20of%20the%20university5of20Zimbabwe/vol9n1/juz001001005.pdf](http://anweb.lib.msu.edu/DMC/Africa.%20Journals/pdfs/journal%20of%20the%20university5of20Zimbabwe/vol9n1/juz001001005.pdf) accessed 19/04/2015, pp 2,8

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

rely of their family in the difficult economic world. Our own observation as ministers confirms the same even in the modern communities. For the Shona, every success or failure in life originates in the spiritual world.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to note that Shona traditional prayers were not directly done to God but through the ancestors who the praying people felt close to and thought of as more empathetic to their situations. God was too remote from them in terms of hierarchy.<sup>30</sup> Adventist Christian ministers must work to help a Shona African to overcome the worldview that alienates him from speaking directly to God. Emphasis of the fact of God's intimate relationship with man through Jesus can help. Contemporary Adventist Ministers need to design Adventist rituals that cover family economic ventures with prayer. Important as these ventures are to family livelihoods, it is a gross lack of sensitivity and ministry irrelevance to ignore this need. It is also inconsistent when the church shows an interest in tithes and offerings without a supportive and prayerful interest in livelihoods evidenced by deliberate prayer rituals for the family community interests.

According to Mtapuri and Mazengwa, the Shonas believe that if one's ancestors (*vadzimu*) are not appeased because of one's breach of *Ubuntu/hunhu* (being virtuous according to culture), one opens themselves to the attacks of *mashavi* (stray spirits) resulting in continuous misfortunes that are aimed to bring them to *urombe* (misery caused by poverty).<sup>31</sup> It is clear therefore that the traditional Shona worldview needs redress, when one converts to Adventist Christianity. Appropriate rituals should be put in place by contemporary Adventist ministers to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid p 44

<sup>30</sup> Ibid pp 7,8

<sup>31</sup>Oliver Mutapuri and Pindurai Justine Mazengwa. "Of Spirituality and Poverty: A Zimbabwean Cultural Perspective" in *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* Vol 13 1<sup>st</sup> Edition May 2013.

address the psycho-social, emotional and spiritual needs of the converts as they embark on vocational ventures for family livelihoods.

Some suggested ideas would be to use the Adventist Men's Organization platform to have a special function in trainings and special prayers for livelihoods and income generating ventures. There can also be prayer and teachings that enhance Christian lifestyles in different professional occupations. Professionalism and stewardship principles can be taught. Such texts as 1 Timothy 5:18, 16 can be used to augment the above and to strengthen the virtues of community responsibility (for family members and the disadvantaged) and self-reliance. Unlike in the traditional worldview where conformity and uniformity are sometimes enforced, the Adventist Christian worldview should encourage improvement of personal spiritual gifts and exercising of the God given power of choice.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings make us conclude that Adventist ministry in Zimbabwe can design ritual replacement without contention with the community and yet make a positive impact for Christian witnessing. This can only be achieved through intentional higher education that prepares the ministers for this important assignment. Making the gospel come alive in every African community is possible through careful planning and implementation.



