

**EVALUATING SABBATH SCHOOL ACTION UNITS
AMID THE PERSISTENCE OF LARGE-GROUP
MODELS IN THE MALAWI
UNION CONFERENCE**

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Abstract

This research examines the effectiveness of the Sabbath School Action Units initiative within the Malawi Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, investigating the persistent tendency of members to revert to larger groups despite the program's 1995 introduction to maximize membership growth. Analysis of membership statistics from 2000 to 2020 reveals a decadal growth rate of approximately 45% to 46%, suggesting that small group objectives were only minimally achieved compared to the exponential growth patterns of the early New Testament church. To investigate this stagnation, the study utilizes Audrey V. Sidorenkov's theory of small group dynamics which focuses on the processes of contradiction, integration, and disintegration alongside theories of cultural dissimilarity and social self-regulation. The findings indicate that cultural differences were not the primary driver of this regression; rather, the challenge stems from a lack of leadership competency in managing internal group contradictions. Consequently, the research concludes that achieving maximum qualitative and quantitative growth requires training leaders in self-regulation mechanisms, specifically goal setting and feedback seeking, to effectively harmonize group integration and prevent unit disintegration.

Keywords: Sabbath School Action Units/Small Groups, contradictions, integration, disintegration, cultural dissimilarity, self-regulation

1. Introduction

The General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department introduced the Sabbath School Action Units initiative between 1995 and 2020. The purpose was to maximize church membership growth through the small group initiative. Using available church membership growth rate statistics, this study argues that, while small groups were established in the SDA Church in Malawi to maximize church growth, only minimal growth was realized. This assertion is proven by the Annual and Decadal growth rates from 1999 to 2009 and from 2010 to 2020.

1.1 The Malawi Union Conference Statistical Growth Rate: 2000 – 2009 and 2010 - 2020

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Membership	172450	192372	203341	213566	230607	233300	249300	258382	272642	294202
Gain/Loss		19922	10,969	10225	17041	2703	16000	9082	14260	21560
Annual Growth Rate		10%	6%	5%	8%	7%	6%	4%	5%	7%
Decadal Growth Rate										46%

1.2 The Malawi Union Conference Statistical Growth Rate: 2010 - 2020¹

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Membership	318227	338552	363167	393007	418847	433988	467828	494977	530767	558273	588566
Gain/Loss	87025	20325	24615	29840	25840	15141	33840	27149	35790	27506	30293
Annual Growth Rate	8%	6%	7%	8%	7%	4%	7%	6%	7%	5%	5%
Decadal Growth Rate											45%

2. Comparative Factors that Contributed to Massive Growth in the New Testament Early Church with the Action Units (Small Group) Growth Strategic Initiatives in Malawi

The tables above reveal that the annual membership growth rate over the ten-year period from 1999 to 2009 ranged from 4% to 12%. The 10-year Decadal Growth Rate (DGR) was 46%. The same trend of growth occurred from 2010 to 2020: 4% to 8%. The decadal growth rate was also almost the same, at 45%. Using the same formula, this indicates that over the long 20-year period from 2000 to 2020, the growth rate was 71%.²

¹Formula for calculating Growth Rate (Current Membership – Previous Membership) ÷ Current x 100.

² This study has not considered what type of growth, whether biological, evangelistic campaigns, nurturing, retention trends, and other means of winning souls to Christ. It has also not considered drop-outs due to death, apostasy, missing or any other type of losses. This type of computation may be considered in another research project due to the limits of this paper.

In comparison, in Acts 1:15, the early church was composed of a community of 120 people. On the day of Pentecost, when they preached the gospel, 3000 more members were converted and baptized (Acts 2:41). Thus, within a day, membership rose from a community of 120 to 3120, with a massive 3119% Growth Rate per day, using the same Growth Rate formula. Shortly after this, 5000 were baptized (Acts 4:4), totaling 8120. The Growth Rate per that day was a lofty 62%. Even though the growth trend in the Early New Testament Church occurred within contrasting socio-cultural contexts, such as historical background, the ‘tongues of fire’ and Pentecost may not be the same; the factors that contributed to the massive growth in small groups may be of vital comparative importance to the study. This is established in the following biblical and theological foundations of small groups.

3. Biblical and Theological Foundation of Small Groups and Church Growth

Both the Old and the New Testaments reveal the importance of a home setting as a structure of a small group, even though the Old Testament does not address small groups in the context of church growth. In the Old Testament, the fundamental socio-religious structure was the patriarchal household (*bet ab*), which served as the primary center for covenant education and worship rather than institutional or numerical church expansion (e.g., Exod. 12:3–4; Deut. 6:6–9). Conversely, the New Testament intentionally utilizes the household setting (*oikos*) as the primary engine for evangelistic expansion and community multiplication through the house-church model (e.g., Acts 2:46; 5:42; Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15).

The terminologies of *koinonia*, *oikos*, and ‘one another’ by inference relate to the five basic roles of small groups as addressed by Dale Galloway. These basic roles are: (1), To provide multiple points of entry into the church - ‘Koinonia’ (Fellowship). (2), To provide a very effective form of evangelism - ‘Oikos’ (House church). (3), The only way that each member can effectively be cared for – ‘One another’. (Loving one another) (4), Enhance the spiritual growth of each member in the church ‘Koinonia’. (5), To properly allow every member to participate in the mission of the church and thus fulfill the Ephesians 4 mandate – ‘Koinonia’, ‘Oikos’ and ‘One another’.³ Small groups bring the church members much closer together more than in a setting of the larger church grouping. The roles of teaching, serving, singing, praying, healing are done in a spirit of teamwork and togetherness. Explicitly, the terminologies of ‘Koinonia’, ‘Oikos’, and ‘one another’ manifests themselves efficiently in small groups. In short the role of small groups is to provide opportunities to participate in mission and church growth.⁴

³ Dale Galloway and Kathi Mills, *The Small Group Book* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1995), 10.

⁴ Russell Burrill, *Creating Healthy Adventist Churches through Natural Church Development* (Berrien Spring, MI: Andrews University, 2003), 21, quoted in Mutuyimana Nkundakozera, “The Role of Small-Group Practices on Members’ Participation in Church Mission in North-West Rwanda,” *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education*, vol. 8, Iss.2, 2024, 238–245.

In the Old Testament, small group relationships were well established in the Genesis creation narrative. The family household was the smallest group which developed to a tribe and further to nations and multiple of nations (Genesis 1-11). Specifically, the concept of small groups can be inferred when God called Abraham as a purge to universal polytheism. He and his household was called to be an advocate of the gospel of salvation by grace.⁵ The whole nation of Israel grew out of just that little group of people (Gen. 12:1-2). Even the Israelites were chosen by God not because they were large in number but a small group (Deut. 7:7-8). They grew-up from twelve heads of tribes to a clan (Numbers 26:21-49). From only the group of the twelve sons of Jacob came out all the tribe of Israel (Gen. 49; Joshua 13-22).

In the New Testament, Jesus called a small group of twelve disciples. He commanded them to spread the gospel worldwide (Mark 3:15-19; Matt 10:12-16; 28:18-20). He trained them and sent them out two by two (Mark 6:7, 12, 13; Matt. 10:1-4). The commissioning of the apostles was done in a context of a small group (Acts 1:8). That commissioning initiated a universal perspective of mission starting from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria extending to the whole world but starting with only eleven people (Acts 1:4-8). In particular, the conversion of Philip the jailer and his family was done in a small group of a house setting (Acts 16:23-32). Also, Paul worked with a small group of people like Priscilla, Aquila, and Barnabas; each one of them in that context was free to use their talents (Acts 18:18-23). There was a ministry of churches planted in different houses (Rom. 16:3-5). Thus, the church in the home provided a most dynamic setting of a small group for Christian fellowship and worship thus reflecting the 'koinonia' terminology.

Thus, the early church was composed of a group of people gathering in private homes.⁶ Houses were used for prayer meetings thus reflecting the 'Oikos' terminology (Acts 2:41; 5:42). Luke also indicates that the small group of eleven people had grown up to a "Community" of people composed of 120 disciples gathering in Jerusalem before Pentecost (Acts 1:15). Members of the house group supported 'one another' in love, joy, encouragement and refreshment.⁷ They ate together, fellowshiped in prayer and Bible study (Acts 2: 42-45). They were also of one heart and mind (unity). They shared equally their belongings and attended to the needy. They were generous, supporting and nurturing each other. Everyone felt belonging since every one's need was provided for (Acts 2:32-37). They also had a good public reputation (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35). Thus, when they all gathered together during the day of Pentecost, they experienced a sound like a mighty wind. They also saw tongues of fire. Thus they were filled with the Holy Spirit. This enabled them to speak in other tongues. This finally led to Peter's sermon and the conversion of 3000 people marking the initial beginning of the Christian Church (Acts 2:1-13, 41).

⁵ M. F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981), 54.

⁶ T. Jones, *Church Planting from the Ground Up* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2004), 55.

⁷ G.W. Icenogle, *Biblical Foundation for Small Group Ministry: An International Approach* (Downers Grove: IVP Connect, 1994), 314-15.

4. Ellen G. White Support of Small Groups

The same importance of the role of small groups is also reflected in the writings of Ellen G. White. She observed that small groups assist in keeping the bond of believers tight and cohesive. They help to develop love, unity, encouragement, and strength from the assistance of others.⁸ Small groups gathering aid in winning souls to Jesus than are sermons in church and open air. She emphasized that small groups' social meetings are best for training in witnessing for Jesus Christ.⁹ Thus, she believed that the work of the Lord will advance effectively when members gather in small groups worshipping and praying daily.¹⁰ The above biblical analysis of the foundation and the writings of E.G. White by inference, reveals the importance of the Small Groups for Church growth.

5. Brief Historical Background of Small Groups during Great Awakening (16th to 17th Century)

The small groups were house churches used as links of relationship between local churches and the universal church.¹¹ They continued as primary context of early Christian discipleship until the fourth century that ushered in the Constantinian era and the rise of the basilica. Atkinson and Comiskey testify on the historical significance of small groups in the form of house churches.¹² They served in the church's efforts in discipleship, revival, and in evangelism. Significantly, they were utilized more in the revival and awakening by the Moravians, John Wesley, and the contemporary cell group movement.¹³

Peter Bunton affirms that small group strategies were used during and after the Reformation. These set the stage for the first major spiritual awakenings like the Pietists, Moravians, and John Wesley.¹⁴ Also, there were small group initiatives among the 16th and 17th century Puritan congregations known as the "conferences," It was this Puritan model of the small groups that

⁸ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1902), 21–22. This contains her famous statement: "the formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort is a plan that has been presented before me by One who cannot err."

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald 1946), 115.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 111.

¹¹ Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 74.

¹² Harley T. Atkinson and Joel Comiskey, "Lessons from the Early House Church for Today's Cell Groups," *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 75; quoted in Joe Mack Easterling, "Big Things Start Small: A Survey of the Role of Small Groups in Christianity's Major Spiritual Awakenings" (PhD diss., Liberty University [Rawlings School of Divinity], 2020), 9–10.

¹³ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups: A History of Cell Ministry in the Church* (Moreno Valley, CA: CCS, 2015), 19.

¹⁴ Peter Bunton, "300 Years of Small Groups: The European Church from Luther to Wesley," *Christian Education Journal*, 3, 11, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 88–106.

contributed to the rise of the First Great Awakening in the American colonies. It was this model of small groups that serves as practical and applicable model for the current small groups strategies in the church.¹⁵ This brief historical account provides a contemporary account of the effectiveness of the small groups that the SDA Church in Malawi adopted as Sabbath School Action Units for the purpose of membership nature, retention and growth. It is in this historical context that the study of the small group dynamics theory is of vital importance in order to effectively respond to the issue addressed in this study.

6. The Small Groups Dynamics Theory

I base much of my analysis of the theory of small group dynamics on the research done by Audrey V. Sidorenkov as presented in her various research literature.¹⁶ She sums-up some of her findings in one of her articles ‘Dynamics of Small Groups: Micro-group Theory.’ According to Sidorenkov micro-group theory is a socio-psychological theory of a small group which embraces two interconnected conceptual spaces such as ‘group’ as a system including all its phenomena and ‘group’ and its dynamics.¹⁷ The theory presents such dynamics as contradictions, integration and disintegration. In that context, group dynamics relates to a field of inquiry which is dedicated to advancing the knowledge about the nature of groups including the laws of their development and their interrelations with individuals, other groups and larger institutions.¹⁸ Group dynamics also aid in analyzing group communications in order to make the groups more effective.¹⁹ It is in this context that this study relates this theory to the Small Groups/Action Units ranging from 6 to 8 people.

The interaction of the group system and group dynamics may aid in this study in answering such questions as:- Why did the Small Groups/Action Units reverted back to their larger groupings and secondly what factors effected such a regression as well as minimal statistic membership growth? It is in such a context that this study situate such a needful response in Sidorenkov’s theory analyzing factors that affect group behavior such as structure, i.e. an

¹⁵Joanne J. Jung, “Puritan Conference: ‘A Kinde of Paradise,’” *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 112; for additional fruit of Jung’s research on Puritan small groups, see Joanne J. Jung, *Godly Conversation: Rediscovering the Puritan Practice of Conference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 91–95.

¹⁶ A.V. Sidorenkov, *Dynamics of Informal Subgroups In Group: The Socially-Psychological Analysis* (Rostov-on-Don: Rostov State University, 2004), 22–26; Audrey V. Sidorenkov, “Trends of psycho-pedagogical effect on academic groups”, *Voprosy Psikhologii*, vol. 4 (1998): 21–29; Audrey V. Sidorenkov, “Psychological Contradictions in a Small Group,” *Voprosy Psikhologii*, vol. 1 (2003): 4150; Audrey V. Sidorenkov, “Psychological Mechanisms of Small Group Dynamics: Integration and Disintegration,” *Voprosy Psikhologii*, vol. 5 (2004): 63–72.

¹⁷ Andrey V. Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group: Microgroup Theory Approach,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 86 (2013): 198 – 204.

¹⁸ D. Cartwright, and A. Zander, eds, *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 19.

¹⁹ K. Davis & J.W. Newstrom, *Human Behavior at Work, Organizational Behavior*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill International Editions, 1989), 387.

examination of group size, group roles, group norms and cohesiveness. Included are factors like group decision-making processes, power dynamics and conflicting interactions that also affect group development negatively. The theory also examines group tasks complexity and interdependence. Thus, in grounding her theory from a wide range of authorities, Sidorenkov advises that it is vital that group leaders must be aware of such dynamics since the lack of such competency can lead to the loss of direction and focusing on wrong priorities; hence, lack of development leading to the breakup of groups.²⁰

7. Small Group Dynamics: Contradictions, Integration, and Disintegration

The core of group dynamics is constituted within contradictions as the source of self-transformation. It includes related processes such as integration and disintegration which are identified as the mechanism of self-transformation.²¹ Citing various theories, Sidorenkov observes that contradictions may appear to be a negative process; however, the source of self-development in dialectical philosophy is associated with contradiction.²² It involves a variety of variables such as: needs,²³ performance,²⁴ conflict²⁵ including contradiction itself.²⁶ Distinctively, contradiction is distinguished with the conflict construct; an internal property of an individual that expresses a divergence of opposites at a cognitive level of an individual's activity.²⁷ In essence, contradiction may thus evoke various types of integration or disintegration within the interaction of micro-groups or small groups. Conflict is thus one of the disintegrative types that includes the following dynamics: - avoidance, contest, and competition.²⁸

²⁰ Davis & Newstrom, *Human Behavior at Work*, 387.

²¹ Sidorenkov, "Dynamics of Small Group," 198.

²² F. F. Vyakkerev, "Contradiction as a Source of Development," in *Materialist Dialectics*, vol. 1: *Objective Dialectics*, ed., F. V. Konstantinov and V. G. Marakhov (Moscow: Mysl, 1981), 299–306.

²³ M. Rubin and M. Hewstone, "Social Identity Theory's Self-esteem Hypothesis: A Review and Some Suggestions for Clarification," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 2 (1998): 40–62.

²⁴ Arthur V. Petrovsky, *Studies in Socio-Psychological Theory of a Collective* (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1982); cited in Andrey V. Sidorenkov, "Dynamics of Small Group: Microgroup Theory Approach," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 86 (2013): 199.

²⁵ Lewis Coser, *Fundamentals of Conflict Management* (St. Petersburg: Svetlyachok, 1999), quoted in Andrey V. Sidorenkov, "Dynamics of Small Group: Microgroup Theory Approach," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 86 (2013): 198–204.

²⁶ L.A. Erbert, "Conflict and Dialectics: Perceptions of Dialectical Contradictions in Marital Conflict" *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, vol. 17 (2000): 638–59.

²⁷ Andrey V. Sidorenkov, "Dynamics of Small Group: Microgroup Theory Approach," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 86 (2013): 199.

²⁸ Sidorenkov, "Dynamics of Small Group": 199.

However, contradiction produces a new form of integration which is in itself a source of disintegrative activity of parties, groups or small groups.²⁹ Within such an apparent dichotomy, contradiction is also a source of group self-transformation and self-development. This is because it intensifies interaction, exchange, communication, social perception, and experience.³⁰ It is in such a dialectical context that contradiction is a process for change and transformation. It is also the source of the development of groups/small groups leading to maximum increase of church membership if wisely managed in the Sabbath School Action Units/Small Groups.

8. Transformation Mechanism: Integration and Disintegration

According to Sidorenkov, self-transformation is a functioning of either a micro-group/small group or an individual. It is identified as a universal mechanism of development within the interaction processes of integration and disintegration internally or externally.³¹ Such a transformation mechanism is reflected in the dialectical law: - “The unity of mutually excluding and simultaneously mutually supposing opposites.”³² Using this law, the study observes that the integration process relates to “the unity of mutually supposing opposites.” But, the disintegration process refers to “the unity of mutually opposing opposites.” Both of these processes are linked to contradictions.³³ The existence and identity of these two opposite conditions depend upon their co-existence. They coexist independently but at the same time they depend upon each other as well as presupposing each other even within tension.³⁴

Incidentally, Sidorenkov links her theory to the Hegelian dialectic assertion that contradiction is a real aspect of life which continually overcomes and continually renews itself in the process of change.³⁵ Thus, it is through cautious management of such transformation mechanisms that even the management of the Sabbath School Small Groups can realize the intended objective of maximum church membership growth. Otherwise, void of that,

²⁹ Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group:”199.

³⁰ Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group:”199.

³¹ Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group:”199.

³² It is also the standpoint that everything develops by means of a struggle of opposites, by a division, a dichotomy, of every unity into mutually exclusive opposites. See: V. T. J. McGill and W.T. Parry, “The Unity of Opposites: A Dialectical Principle,” *Science & Society*, vol. 12 no. 4 (Fall 1948): 418–44.

³³ Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group:” 198.

³⁴ V. T. J. McGill and W.T. Parry, “The Unity of Opposites: A Dialectical Principle,” *Science & Society*, vol. 12 no. 4 (Fall 1948), 418–444; Mamadi Corra, *The Structure of Group Processes* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books / Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 1.

³⁵ Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group:”198. See: Lincoln, *The Dialectical Path of Law*, 5.

small groups will break up. They then return to their unproductive, large-group comfort zone. I thus aver that when the leaders of the small groups in church are aware of such dialectical process towards self-transformation and wisely tend to each small group, the process of independent existence, co-existence, and cohesion is inevitable. This can lead to effective maximum church membership retention which may contribute to membership growth maximally rather than break-up.

9. Co-existence and Existence: Integration Disintegration Process

Basically, while integration ensures co-existence of parties in totality, disintegration supports the possibility of existence of each parties on its own; whether it is a small group or an individual.³⁶ This is because integration is a process of convergence and merging of parties for a unilateral independent mutual assimilation.³⁷ Disintegration signifies the process of divergence or separation of the parties especially due to differences and variances which are manifest in the empowerment and strength of the related parties.³⁸ Thus, the study reveals that even though the two processes are contrasts, they are both vital for transformation. Transformation brings about the possibility of alteration, renovation, and change which is vital for development within the process of existence and co-existence.

However, extreme care must be taken into account since disintegration may weaken relationships and disrupt the small groups due to damaged integrity.³⁹ Therefore, integration must act simultaneously with disintegration in the process of existence and co-existence of the small groups. To effect this, there must be the dynamic of self-regulation leading to the mutual harmonization between integration and disintegration. I therefore, affirm the value of a self-regulation process that may concretize cohesion to maximize church membership growth.

According to Sidorenkov, there are several regulations of integration and disintegration processes that bring the intensification of either integration or disintegration in some activity group or subgroup. The intensification of one process, either integration or disintegration, produces the manifestation or appearance as well as the intensification or strengthening of the opposite process in the other group or subgroup activity. When that happens, there is contest between groups that intensifies intragroup cohesiveness.⁴⁰ Such a cohesion allows “sticking together” and “working well together” in a group or subgroup. Cohesion thus strengthens unity at work while working together towards a goal within a small group. It may also allow each small group member to get the satisfaction of his/her emotional needs and belongingness. This is enhanced by

³⁶ Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group:” 198.

³⁷ Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group:” 198.

³⁸ Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group:” 198.

³⁹ Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group:” 198.

⁴⁰ Sidorenkov, “Dynamics of Small Group:” 198.

such constructs as, attraction to individual members of the group, instrumental value of the group, and risk-taking behaviors that the group experiences.⁴¹

Due to the same process of integration and disintegration, there may be change that is brought about in one small group that may also evoke a corresponding change that may contribute to the disappearance of mutually shared goals, norms and values in the subgroup. This leads to the destruction of relationships between its members that finally climaxes into small group break up.⁴² It is possible that such a phenomena might have contributed to the break-up of Sabbath School Action Units in the Malawi SDA Church. This is because individuals retreated back to their larger groups where they may have become nominal, insignificant, less belonging, and not participatory in a structure that was not cohesive. This may have derailed the objectives of the Action Units strategic initiative that led to minimal membership statistic growth.

Another factor within the theory is that, there may arise in the small groups a perceived conflict without attempts to resolve them either from inside or outside. This leads to the intensification of conflict with negative consequences of the effectiveness of the small groups.⁴³ Thus, leaders of the small groups in church must be able to control and manage such a dichotomy, failing which, there is the disruption of the small groups without meeting its goals and objectives. Due to the dialectical psychological complexity of this study, I include the study of cultural dissimilarity and the processes of self-regulation and monitoring for further elaboration.

10.Cultural Dissimilarity: The Value of Self-Regulation and Monitoring

It may appear that the Action Units/Small Group initiative had challenges in the Malawi Union Conference of the SDA Church due to the fact that the program was introduced from General Conference in the United States of America. It may be argued that the USA has a different cultural setting that may be suitable to the Action Units initiative and not in a Malawian socio-cultural context. This study argues against that cultural context assumption. Hence, in addition to Sidorenkov theory, I align her theory to Guillaume, Knippenberg, & Brodbeck's theory of self-regulation perspective on cultural dissimilarity and performance. I justify the inclusion of cultural dissimilarity, self-regulation and monitoring into this study because I believe it provides a latitude for a clearer resolve of the uncertainties clouded by the dialectical dynamics presented above as well as the challenges that may be brought about by the cultural tensions. I contend cultural dissimilarity is not unconditionally negative for the small groups and individuals. In fact, it may have positive

⁴¹ Indices of Social Development, "Intergroup Cohesion," International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), accessed April 20, 2022, <https://isd.iss.nl/home/intergroup-cohesion/>.

⁴² A.V. Sidorenov, "Dynamics of Small Group:" 198.

⁴³ A.V. Sidorenov, "Dynamics of Small Group:" 198.

motivational effects in terms of cultural background.⁴⁴ Therefore, cultural dissimilarity reveals an extent to which an individual is different from other group members in terms of cultural background.⁴⁵ Thus, cultural dissimilarity cannot prevent the organization of the Action Units/Small Groups that are purposefully created for effective membership nurturing and church growth.

Incidentally, in organizations with small groups, people may distinguish themselves from others on the basis of their cultural differences.⁴⁶ Also, the social identity category suggests that, people are inclined to work and interact comfortably with the people of their same cultural background. They tend to be more socially integrated into groups where they are more culturally similar.⁴⁷ In addition, they tend to be more motivated and even perform much better than in a culturally dissimilar context.⁴⁸ But, available research observes that this is not always the case.⁴⁹ There is need to consider the issues related to performance, self-regulation and monitoring in order to mitigate for the negative contradictions.

11. Performance, Monitoring, Self-regulation

Available research reveals that when it comes to the moderating effect of status on the relationship between cultural dissimilarity and performance, the result is equivocal or unclear. In fact, Brodbeck found no interaction of status and cultural dissimilarity on performance.⁵⁰ Performance may be worsened and

⁴⁴Yves R. F. Guillaume, Daan van Knippenberg and Felix C. Brodbeck, "Nothing Succeeds Like Moderation: A Social Self-Regulation Perspective on Cultural Dissimilarity and Performance", *The Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 57, no.5 (2014): 1284–1308.

⁴⁵A.S. Tsui, et al., "Being different: Relational Demography and Organizational Attachment," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 37 (1992): 549–579.

⁴⁶ P. Chattopadhyay, E. George, & S.A. Lawrence, "Why Does Dissimilarity Matter? Exploring Self-categorization, Self-enhancement, and Uncertainty Reduction," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 89 (2004): 892–900.

⁴⁷ H. J. M. Kooij-de Bode, D. van Knippenberg, & W. P. van Ginkel, "Ethnic Diversity And Distributed Information In Group Decision Making: The Importance of Information Elaboration," *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Academy of Management Journal, vol. 12, no. 4, (2008): 307–320, quoted in: Y. R. F. Guillaume, D. van Knippenberg, & F. C. Brodbeck, "Nothing Succeeds Like Moderation: A Social Self-Regulation Perspective on Cultural Dissimilarity And Performance," *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 57 (2014): 1284–1308.

⁴⁸ van Knippenberg and Brodbeck, "Nothing Succeeds Like Moderation:" 1284–1308.

⁴⁹ Y. R. F. Guillaume, F. C. Brodbeck, & M. Riketta, "Surface and Deep-Level Dissimilarity Effects on Social Integration and Individual Effectiveness Related Outcomes in Work Groups: A Meta-Analytic Integration," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, vol. 85, no. 1 (2012): 80–115.

⁵⁰ F. C. Brodbeck, Y. R. F. Guillaume, and N. J. Lee, "Ethnic Diversity as a Multilevel Construct: The Combined Effects of Dissimilarity, Group Diversity, and Societal Status on Learning Performance in Work Groups," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42, no. 8 (2011): 1198–1218.

challenging when a team member is cultural different from his/her peers.⁵¹ Hackman asserts that team member performance that is effective may not be just affected by cultural dissimilarity.⁵² Since there is less proof that social integration mediates the relationship between cultural dissimilarity and performance, research proposes an analysis that extends social identity framework by integrating insights in uncertainty reduction,⁵³ and social self-regulation.⁵⁴ For the limits of this paper, I briefly sum-up both uncertainty reduction and self-regulation processes in order to complement to the clarification of the dialectical dynamics of contradiction, integration and disintegration including the negative assertion of cultural differences.

12. Self-Regulation Theory and Uncertainty Reduction

Social identity research asserts that what renders interactions with others meaningful, and having confidence about what to expect from them, and how to behave, is feeling certain about oneself and other people.⁵⁵ It is alleged that, since people are typically sensitive to indications of group expectations and requirements, and since cultural dissimilarity invites uncertainty, it is less clear on how to behave in order to meet the group expectations and performance requirements.⁵⁶ Thus, Chattopadhyay recommends that social self-regulation can help in dealing with the challenge between cultural dissimilarity and performance uncertainties.⁵⁷

13. Social Self-Regulation and Monitoring

⁵¹J. A. Chatman, J.T. Polzer, S.G. Barsade, & M.A. Neale, "Being Different Yet Feeling Similar: The Influence of Demographic Composition and Organizational Culture on Work Processes and Outcomes," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 43 (1998):749–80.

⁵²J. Richard Hackman, "The Design of Work Teams," in *Handbook of Organizational Behavior*, ed. Jay W. Lorsch (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987), 328–331.

⁵³ M. A. Hogg, & D. I. Terry, "Social Identity And Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts," *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 25 (2000): 121–140.

⁵⁴ D. Abrams, "Social Self-Regulation," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 20 (2000): 473–483.

⁵⁵ M. A. Hogg, & D. I. Terry, "Social Identity And Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts," *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 25 (2000):121–140, quoted in Guillaume, Yves R. F., Daan van Knippenberg, and Felix C. Brodbeck. "Nothing Succeeds Like Moderation: A Social Self-Regulation Perspective on Cultural Dissimilarity and Performance." *Academy of Management Journal* 57, no. 5 (2014): 1284–1308.

⁵⁶Prithviraj Chattopadhyay, Elizabeth George, and Carmen Kaman Ng, "An Uncertainty Reduction Model of Relational Demography," in *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, ed. M. Ronald Buckley and Anthony R. Wheeler (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011), 30:226.

⁵⁷Prithviraj Chattopadhyay, "Beyond direct and symmetrical effects: The influence of demographic dissimilarity on organizational citizenship behavior," *Academy of Management Journal* 42, no. 3 (1999): 275.

Social self-regulation is a process that refers to the ways in which individuals regulate their behavior to meet the demands of social situations.⁵⁸ It modulates and directs action when individuals try to coordinate their behavior with people of dissimilar cultural category. Also, social self-regulation aids in clarifying group expectations and requirements and selecting courses of action to get in harmony. Available research recommends the following psychological behaviors for enacting self-regulations: - (1) goal setting,⁵⁹ (2) goal orientations,⁶⁰ and (3), feedback seeking.⁶¹ Accordingly, self-monitoring is the most fundamental process for self-regulation towards effective performance.⁶² Therefore, those individuals who are able to monitor their performance are also able to clarify goals, track differences between goals and performance, and determine how to respond.⁶³ This accounts for productive performance, transformation and development regardless of cultural dissimilarity.

Irrefutably, this study recognizes that much has been documented on the challenges of cultural differences that limit the effectiveness of small groups. But this research argues that there were no people of mixed cultures in the Sabbath School Action Units but all were indigenous Malawians not Western or Foreign. Secondly, even if it were so, employing the cultural dissimilarity theory and its accompanying fundamental process of self-regulation, effective performance would have been effected by terming the uncertainties. Therefore, this study contends that cultural differences in the Sabbath School Action Units were not the cause of lukewarm church growth in the SDA Church in Malawi and causal to the reverting to conventional larger groups.

14. Findings of the Study

The research presents a comprehensive analysis of why the Sabbath School Action Units (SSAU) initiative in the Malawi Union Conference has struggled to produce the explosive growth seen in the early Christian church. By synthesizing the statistical data with socio-psychological and theological frameworks, the study offers the following broader perspectives and subsequent implications.

The Growth Gap (Statistical vs. Biblical Reality): While the Malawi Union Conference has maintained steady membership, the findings reveal a “lukewarm” decadal growth rate of approximately 45–46%. This stands in stark contrast to the New Testament model, which achieved a 3,119% growth rate on the day of Pentecost,

⁵⁸ D. Abrams, “Social Self-Regulation,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 20 (1994): 473–483; Felix C. Brodbeck, Yves R. F. Guillaume, and B. Müller, “Demographic similarity and individual performance: The moderating role of diversity climates,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 32, no. 6 (2011): 822.

⁵⁹ Edwin A. Locke and Gary P. Latham, *A Theory of Goal Setting & Task Performance* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 7.

⁶⁰ D. Vandewalle, “Development And Validation of a Work Domain Goal Orientation Instrument,” *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, vol. 57, (1997): 995–1015.

⁶¹ S. J. Ashford, “Feedback-Seeking in Individual Adaptation: A Resource Perspective,” *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 29 (1986): 465–487.

⁶² A. Bandura, “Social Cognitive Theory of Self-Regulation,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, vol. 50 (1991): 248–287.

⁶³ Bandura, “Social Cognitive Theory Of Self-Regulation:” 248–287.

suggesting that current small-group strategies are missing the "dynamic" element of the early *oikos* (house-church) model.

The Psychological Barrier of "Comfort Zones": The "case in conflict" where members consistently revert to larger groupings—is not merely a lack of interest but a failure to navigate small group dynamics. The study identifies that without competent leadership to manage internal "contradictions," groups naturally disintegrate, leading members to retreat to the "unproductive, large-group comfort zone" where they become nominal and less participatory.

The Myth of Cultural Dissimilarity: A significant perspective offered is that the failure of Action Units in Malawi is *not* due to the model being a Western import. Since the groups consist of indigenous Malawians, the research argues that "cultural dissimilarity" is an insufficient excuse for failure; instead, the issue lies in a universal lack of "social self-regulation" and "self-monitoring" within the group structure.

Contradictions as Catalysts for Growth: Based on Sidorenkov's theory, the research views group "contradictions" (internal tensions) not as negative conflicts to be avoided, but as essential sources of "self-transformation". The findings suggest that if these tensions are managed correctly, they intensify interaction and communication, leading to group development rather than a breakup.

15.Implications of the Study

The study outlines several critical implications for the future of the SDA Church in Malawi and its mission:

Shift to Internal Dynamic Management: The church must move from merely promoting small groups externally to managing their internal dynamics. Leadership must be trained to identify and harmonize the simultaneous processes of "integration" (group unity) and "disintegration" (individual identity) to prevent group dissolution.

Mandatory Leadership Competency Training: A major implication is the need for a specific curriculum for Action Unit leaders focused on "social self-regulation". Leaders must become competent in facilitating goal setting, goal orientation, and consistent feedback-seeking to maintain group focus and productivity.

Enhancing Member Retention and Engagement: Effectively managed small groups provide the *koinonia* (intimacy) and *oikos* (hospitality) necessary for spiritual nurturing. The study implies that mastering these dynamics is the primary path to transitioning members from "nominal" participants to highly engaged missionaries.

Structural Transformation for Maximum Growth: To achieve "maximum quantitative and qualitative growth," the church must embrace the house-church model as a dynamic setting for fellowship rather than just a social subdivision. This involves using "self-monitoring" to track differences between goals and actual performance.

Need for Further Contextual Research: The research identifies a remaining gap in "critical cultural contextualization," implying that while psychological dynamics are universal, further study is needed on how specific Malawian cultural values can be leveraged to strengthen group cohesion.

16. Conclusion

The study concludes that effective leadership awareness and the management of “contradictions” the primary source of transformation along with the interaction of “integration and disintegration,” are essential to fostering small-group cohesion. By masterfully handling these dialectical mechanisms, leaders can significantly improve membership nurturing, retention, and growth within Sabbath School Action Units. This success is further supported by reducing uncertainties related to cultural dissimilarity and promoting social self-regulation and self-monitoring among group members. Ultimately, managing psychological behaviors such as goal setting and feedback-seeking allows the church to overcome the persistent trend of members reverting to larger, less effective grouping.

17. Recommendations

To maximize church membership growth, the study offers the following recommendations:

Internal Management Training: small group leaders should be trained to manage dynamics internally to control contradictions that otherwise lead to conflict, resistance, and the eventual breakup of units. **Embrace Contradictions for Growth:** Leaders must recognize that contradictions, when managed wisely, serve as a source of self-transformation by intensifying social perception, communication, and experience.

Harmonize Group Processes: leaders must learn to balance integration and disintegration simultaneously to ensure the healthy co-existence of members. **Competency in Self-Regulation:** Leaders should be competent in leveraging cultural dissimilarity through self-regulation and monitoring to enhance group effectiveness.

Encourage Specific Behaviors: the study suggests promoting specific psychological behaviors for self-regulation, including goal setting, goal orientation, feedback-seeking, and self-monitoring. **Further Research:** Future research is recommended to explore the field of critical cultural contextualization