

# **The role of the church in strengthening the Zimbabwe's social fabric: the case of Solusi community**

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## **Abstract**

The social fabric is the force that brings the society together so that there is social cohesion and stability. It is only when the society is in a stable condition that development and the realisation of social goals are attainable, hence the need to strengthen the social fabric. Over the past decade the social fabric of Zimbabwe has been in a free fall, leading to a state of anarchy and fear. Indicators like corruption, lawlessness, violence, indiscipline to name a few have been used as evidence that our fabric is now held by few threads. A study carried out at Solusi community has found out that this community has a very strong social fabric that binds the whole community together in a harmonious way. One hundred participants picked using a stratified random sampling method was used in the study. 68% of the participants attributed a strong social fabric at Solusi community to the role played by the church. The participants strongly felt that the teachings by the church produced responsible and responsive individuals that are always there for others in this community. 15% of the participants felt that the education institution had a significant role in strengthening of the social fabric at Solusi. The participants argue that educated individuals tend to be more responsible in the societal development. 9% of the participants felt that the absence of night clubs has led to peace in the community 8% of the participants had other views on the strong social fabric in the Solusi community. This paper argues that the church as a socialisation agent should be given more space and time to influence the Zimbabwean Society. The church's teachings should permeate all the social avenues of the society so that our social fabric might be strengthened and all our developmental directions be achieved.

Key words: social fabric

## **Introduction**

In African traditional societies cases of corruption and general moral degeneration were very rare. This was mainly because of a firm adherence to African group ethic popularly referred to as ubuntu/vunhu. Ubuntu/vunhu strongly affirms that an individual finds meaning in the community. This therefore meant that individualism was frowned at and everything was treated as a common asset. The products of these societies were morally upright people who felt for fellow community members. This strong moral fabric saw sustenance of African societies through the ages.

Over the past decades this humanistic philosophy has been given little attention, resulting in the weakening of the social fabric in Zimbabwe, leading to a state of anarchy and fear. Social indicators like corruption, lawlessness, violence, and indiscipline, have been seen as evidence that our social fabric is now held by few threads. Horton and Hunt (1984) argue that in the absence of a strong social fabric, it becomes difficult for a society to embark on development projects that might improve the societal living standards. While it is noted that there are many institutions that can play a role in the strengthening of the social fabric of the society like the education, the family and the media, this paper submits it is largely the responsibility of the church to see that the social fabric is kept intact at all times so that all social systems are operating effectively to accomplish the work of the society.

Although there is a general decay of the social fabric in Zimbabwe, there are still few places where the social fabric is still intact, enabling socio-economic development to occur in such places. One such place is Solusi, where the community seems to be enjoying a tranquil and peaceful environment largely due to the existence of a strong and vibrant social fabric. The existence of a strong fabric at Solusi is credited to the role of religion in the community. This study therefore aims at finding out the contribution of the church on the strengthening of the social fabric in communities.

## **STUDY LOCATION**

The study was conducted at Solusi community which is located 43 km west of Bulawayo. The community is made up of Solusi

University, Solusi High School, Solusi Primary School and people living close to these institutions. The whole community is made up of three thousand residents (2012 preliminary census results). The selection of this study area was largely influenced by the social stability that exists in this area. The area has seen several socio-economic projects succeeding as the community works in unity to achieve their common objectives.

### **Reviewed Related Literature**

Breton (2004) posits that social fabric is that force that drives the members of the society to do what objectively is necessary for them to do. Horton and Hunt (1984) state that social fabric is the power that ensures that the society operates on the principles of orderliness, where each person accepts certain duties towards others and claims certain rights from others. In this paper the term social fabric will mean the social value system that is embedded in a given society for stability and cohesion. In this light, social fabric enables all the members of the society to identify and share their key values and means of observing them in a systematic way with checks and balances.

The literature consulted confirmed that the church plays a vital role in the strengthening of the social fabric in various societies. Niebuhr (1996) argues that while the core business of the church is to preach the word of God in order to win souls for heaven, this is not done in isolation. The church can only exercise its calling effectively if motivated by the love of a neighbour and the community. Niebuhr (1996) further states that, only by engaging in civic work for the sake of the common good, by faithfulness in all one's social callings and being moral upright is it possible for the church to be true to the example of Christ. From the above it can be seen that it becomes mandatory for the church to teach and inculcate the moral virtues to all its members so that all its objectives are achieved. In doing this the church greatly contributes to the shaping of responsible and responsive citizens who are able to engage in developmental activities for the good of their communities and societies.

White (1995) argues that the church by emphasising on the need for hard work for one's sustenance also contributes to the strengthening of the social fabric. "Christians and parents cannot commit a greater sin than to allow their children to have nothing to do. The children soon learn to love idleness, and they grow up shiftless, useless men and women. When they are old enough

to earn their living, and find employment, they work in a lazy, droning way, yet expect to be paid as much as if they were faithful (White, 1995, 345). Such individuals tend to be involved in fraud, theft and robbery to earn a living.

The church places God in all ethics and evaluates all actions and responsibilities from this perspective. The Adventist Handbook of Theology (2000) states that for this reason the church will oppose discrimination in any form emphasising that all human beings are equal before God and should therefore live together in harmony. The church members are further encouraged to pay taxes, respect all laws and property regulations, participate in civic duties and co-operate with civil authorities in curbing or controlling crime and violence. (White 1975)

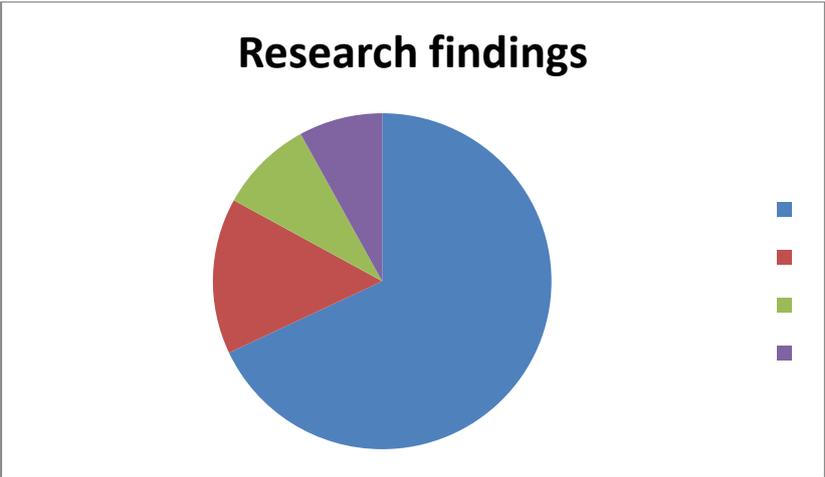
Walsh (1999) argues that in the western world the church is responsible for teaching good moral values to the people making them governable. Although there are high cases of social disharmony in the United States of America, the role of the church has been felt in reinforcing the national norms and values, making the nation governable.

Havilland (2000) maintains that in countries where the church is given adequate space and time to promote its teachings and beliefs, stability has resulted. Weber (1997) explaining the protestant ethic concept, stressed that France developed and progressed more when it embraced the church's teachings, largely the value of hard work, humility and generosity.

### **Methodology**

The research followed a mixed method design, making use of structured interviews and questionnaire surveys. A total of one hundred participants were selected using both stratified and random sampling techniques. The community had to be stratified as to capture the following dimensions, racial differences, nationality differences and occupation statuses. To cross-check the validity of the responses of the participants the researcher did some observations on the way of life within the Solusi Community and attended some of the church services to hear some of the teachings that the church promotes to the community.

### **The Findings and Discussions**



The findings conducted showed that 68% of the participants attributed the stability of at the Solusi community to the role played by the church, while 15% of the participants felt tht the education institution has a role in bringing up responsive individuals who are always working for the betterment of their communities. Few participants (9%) indicated that the absence of night clubs leads to peace and tranquillity in the community. The remaining participants (8%) had other views on the strong social fabric in the Solusi community.

The research used social stability indicators like oneness, respect, responsibility and peace. The presence of these indicators at Solusi community has been attributed to the role of the church. Most participants (80%) indicated that the Solusi community is characterised by the spirit of oneness where members are close to each other and share all their burdens. The spirit of oneness was also observed when moving around the community as people were talking to each other in cordial format. The homes of this community are not locked or protected, the people believe that their oneness is the greatest protection to their property. So it is this social protection that leads to a thieving free community.

The other common indicator was the respect of one another in the community. A high percentage of participants (75%) indicated that the community greatly cherishes the virtue of respect. The young children in the community still respect all the elderly people derived from the Biblical teaching that mandates the children to respect all the elderly people in their community. (Ephesians 6v 1-2) Respect of the elderly by the children enables the community to practice the concept of communal parenting where all elderly people in the community are enabled and expected to disciple all children in the

community. “Sonke singabazali lapha eSolusi” We are all parents here at Solusi. One of the interviewed parents confirmed. This reinforces the point of communal parent concept that is passionately promoted by the church. The Biblical teaching that state that everyone is his/her brother’s keeper has kept the community intact. Members of this community are free to counsel and correct each other leading to a stable and corrupt free society. Observations showed that after the main church services members are put into small-study groups where members share views on improving their community, and their own individual lives.

The majority of the participants ascribed the social coherence to the fear and knowledge of God. The Solusi Community members strongly believe that God is in charge of their lives and as such they are all accountable to Him. It is this knowledge that drives the community members to shun all evil or sinful tendencies. The members also tend to focus on the life to come i.e the heavenly kingdom instead of worrying about the things of this world. A significant number of participants indicated that people should try and balance their views on this live and future life, so that they remain relevant to this world also.

Observations also revealed that the church has several programmes designed to make all members of the community responsible. Some of these programmes are prison ministries where church members visit the prisons to donate food and other requirements, this activates the spirit of giving and being a responsible citizen. Other programmes with the same objectives are the Women ministries and the Youth ministries.

The Church’s doctrines and teaching material checked by the researcher showed that the community places high value on work and moral development of their members. All community members are encouraged to be involved in different types of vocations so as to be disciplined. The church also places great value in the development of the mental faculties, this is done by exposing the community members to various study areas so that the mind is positively cultivated.

Most of the participants (70%) credited the family life education that is practiced at Solusi as contributing to the social stability at Solusi. The church upholds the institution of marriage as ordained by God in the Bible (Genesis 2v 18). It was observed that there are many family life seminars conducted at Solusi that

help to produce good and stable families that invariably lead to coherent societies. The family life seminars teach among other issues family communication, sex education, budgeting and handling of in-laws. Most of the participants said such seminars and teachings reduce the cases of adultery and fornication which can cause community disintegration. In addition to these seminars there are also family recreational activities that bring the family members together thereby strengthening the family unity, which leads to the community unity.

Fifteen participants largely lecturers gave the education institution the role of producing a stable society of Solusi. These participants felt that educated individuals tend to be more responsive in their approach to life choosing to spend most of their time on developmental issues instead of focussing on petty and divisive issues. Solusi being largely an educational institution tends to specialise on the training of responsible citizens who act as unifying social agents. Observations taken around the community confirmed that most of the people in this community spend much of their time in their studies, leaving no time for gossip and other social ills that are a characteristic of other communities. 60% of the participants who felt education contributed much to the social stability argued that educated people do not want to be involved in any social ills as this would compromise their high status in the community, so they refrain from all unwholesome activities so as to be noble role models in the community.

Nine participants mainly from the lower levels of education, thought that the absence of night clubs contributes to the social cohesion of the society. The participants revealed that people tend to do all sorts of social evils because of drunkenness that is influenced by the night clubs. The participants made several comparisons to communities that have high social evils as a result of the presence of the night clubs. The absence of night clubs guarantees sober community members at all times in the community.

The remaining participants gave varying reasons for the stable community at Solusi. The traditional teachings that are done by the elderly in the community were credited for producing a stable environment. Participants felt that traditional teachings tended to anchor on the church's teachings and valued communal parenting thereby making a stable society. The presence of the police was also mentioned as a factor in the building of a stable

community. Although the number of reported cases in the police camp was very insignificant people felt that their presence was a deterring factor worth consideration.

### **Conclusion**

The study recognises that the role of the church in the larger society has been relegated to irrelevancy hence a high degree of social instability leading to lawlessness, corruption and violence. From the above discussion it can be seen that the church plays a crucial role in the strengthening of the social fabric in the community of Solusi. The church provides the platform for teaching values and norms to the community members. The church meetings give the community members time to interact and share their views on the value systems of the community. The general oneness of the community makes it easy for the moral standards to be maintained as all the members are in agreement with the values. The church also plays a crucial role in shaping responsible citizens who are eager to work for the betterment of their society.

### **Recommendations**

From the above conclusions, this paper therefore recommends that the church as a socialisation agent should be given more space and time to influence the Zimbabwean society. The church's value systems and teachings should permeate all the social avenues of the society so that our social fabric might be strengthened. Deliberate efforts should be put in place so that all social institutions should have time and programmes to propagate the societal values and expectations to all the members of the society.

While the school curriculum has subjects like moral education, guidance and counselling, less time and attention has been given to these subjects. The paper recommends that the schools should spend more quality time on these subjects so that the social fabric is strengthened thereby making it possible for the schools and other social institutions to accomplish their intended goals. The society should also work hard to revitalize the philosophy of *ubuntu*, which kept the traditional societies intact.

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