

# EVALUATING THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF EVANGELISTIC STRATEGIES ON CHURCH GROWTH AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN TANZANIA

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**Abstract:** The study investigates the positive and negative effects of evangelistic strategies on Church growth and community engagement in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania – Iringa diocese focusing on Kihesa Kilolo congregation. Evangelism is central in church's mission encompassing not only incorporates preaching but also social engagements particularly among the marginalized communities While evangelism has historically driven church expansion in Tanzania, questions remain regarding its effectiveness at the parish level, especially in balancing outreach to new believers and the reintegration of inactive members. The research employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design, drawing insights from 30 participants, including clergy, evangelism leaders, and congregants. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that evangelism contributes to numerical growth through increased attendance, baptisms, and confirmations, while also fostering deeper fellowship and stronger ties between the church and community. However, challenges persist: evangelistic efforts often focus on backsliders rather than non-Christians, limiting broader outreach; inadequate resources, poor follow-up, and low member involvement further constrain effectiveness. The study concludes that evangelism in Kihesa Kilolo Parish has both spiritual and social significance, enhancing church vitality and community cohesion. To maximize impact, the parish must adopt inclusive strategies that reach beyond familiar circles, strengthen discipleship, and address contextual challenges. The findings provide practical insights for the ELCT and other churches seeking to refine evangelistic strategies for sustainable mission and growth.

**Key words:** Evangelism, Mission, missional church, Church Growth.

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## I. BACKGROUND

Evangelism is the act of announcing the good news of Jesus Christ who is the Israel's Messiah (Gustafson, 2022). It can be traced back to the commissioning of the eleven by Jesus Christ to the world to spread the good news. The preaching of the gospel is a call to all believers by God to carry out the great mandate given to everyone by Jesus Christ as in the book of Matthew 28:19-22.

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Evangelism today extends beyond preaching and incorporates social engagement, education, healthcare, and advocacy, particularly in marginalized communities (World Council of Churches, 2021).

Over time, Tanzanian Christians have developed a distinct identity that blends Lutheran theology with local customs and leadership structures. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) is one of the largest Lutheran bodies in Africa, with over 7 million members as of 2023 (ELCT, 2023).

According to Nwankwo (2024), Church growth is the building of the Church primarily through evangelism. It is that discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian Churches as they relate to the effective implementation of God's commission to make disciples of all people. Church growth, is not a modern day phenomenon and neither is it a theological theory but a remarkable increase in the numerical strength of the Church. When this happens, the young Church becomes a larger one, having many branches with many believers.

The Iringa Diocese plays a vital role in the spiritual and social lives of its members as it has evangelism as the first core mission where the Diocese is set to do evangelism to all the corners in and out of their borders with the core purpose of increasing the number of Christians from 142,000 to 300,000 come 2027 (DIRA, 2018. Evangelism Department report).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical literature review

Church Growth Theory is rooted in the belief that the mission of the Church is not complete until people hear the gospel, respond to it, and are integrated into the body of Christ. Donald A. McGavran, a pioneer of this theory, argued that evangelism should not be treated as a secondary task but as the central mission of the Church (McGavran, 1983).

### Empirical Literature Review

Taylor (2001) and Morris (2022) give a bold call for contextual evangelization. They argue that the gospel in Africa should not be just a Western transplant but should speak to African realities, stories, and spiritual needs.

Structured discipleship especially through mentorship, modeling Christ-like behavior, organized curricula, and small group involvement led to notable spiritual maturity among congregants Ngala (2021). Tomlinson (n.d), emphasizes that spiritual transformation is rooted in long-term, relational guidance. Esiobu, (2019). Notes that across Africa, many Churches have recognized that real transformation comes when people are intentionally guided to grow in their faith, understand scripture, and live it out in their daily lives

In Tanzania, Churches that invest in consistent teaching, personal accountability, and leadership development see stronger retention and deeper engagement from their members (Kihwaga, 2022). Nhanala and Kurewa (2014) argue that discipleship must engage the "whole life" of a believer. They go ahead and point out that spiritual growth is most effective when it includes emotional healing, vocational guidance, and social support.

Ogunewu (2014), strongly emphasizes on the practical impact of evangelism in community life. He notes that evangelistic efforts that focus on real-life needs such as health education, literacy, and economic empowerment are far more effective in drawing and retaining people. Beougher (2019), further supports this, noting that Churches which view evangelism as ongoing engagement not just a campaign tend to see deeper transformation.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### Study area

The study was conducted in the Northern District (Kihesa) of the ELCT-Iringa Diocese. The reason for selecting the Kihesa Kilolo congregation is because despite the fact that it is in an urban setting with good infrastructure and resources, the congregation faces low attendance.

### Research approach

In this study, the researcher used qualitative research approach as it brought the researcher closer to the people to explore their lived experiences, personal insights and practical involvement in the evangelistic work in Kihesa Kilolo Congregation.

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### Research design

This study employs a case study research design, which is most suitable for examining the impact of evangelization in the missional Church within a specific geographical and social context of ELCT -Iringa Diocese. A case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of evangelization efforts, their outcomes, and the challenges faced by the Church in spreading the gospel. Research design is a plan that guides the researcher in the process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting data.

### Sample size and Sampling techniques

#### Sample size

In this research, the researcher sampled 30 respondents from different categories of people including the evangelism department head, the district pastor, Congregation pastor and lay members.

#### Sampling techniques

The researcher employed purposive sampling technique to select participants. This technique allowed the researcher to select respondents who are actively engaged in evangelistic works, those in leadership positions and regular Church participants. They were able to provide firsthand insights on effective evangelistic strategies, its impact and challenges.

#### Data collection methods and tools

In this research, different methods have been used to collect data to help in the research process. The following methods were used for this research study:

#### Interviews

The researcher prepared open ended questions for individuals to be answered by them. They were used in order to enable the researcher to learn the standpoint of various respondents from the sampled population. The interview dealt with oral questioning technique and discussions. It involved face to face interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee in which the languages used were Swahili and English.

#### Focus Group Discussions

Two focus group discussions containing four people each were conducted whereby one comprised of women's group and the other will comprised of the youth. By conducting the FGD, the researcher had a broader platform to gather collective reflections and compare them in respective of the impact of evangelism.

#### Data analysis

This study used thematic analysis to process the data that was collected. The goal was to identify similar patterns and recurring ideas related to the impact of evangelism at Kihesa Kilolo. The following were used to analyze data:

#### Transcription

All answers and discussions that took place during the interview and the focus group discussion were audio recorded (with the consent from the participants) then later transcribed in Swahili or English. This ensured that all details are covered.

#### Coding

Collected data was manually coded by highlighting the key themes and ideas that keep repeating themselves from different participants and assigned labels. Themes generated from coding were divided and aligned with the specific objectives of the study before interpreting them to draw meaningful conclusions.

#### Validity and reliability

##### Validity

To enhance the accuracy and credibility of the findings, triangulation method was used. Since the data was collected through various methods, it helped to compare perspectives from different sources. Since the researcher has had personal involvement in the Church life she remained neutral and did not interfere or manipulate the data through pre-existing data or experience.

### Reliability

To ensure consistency and dependability of the research process, the researcher made use of standardized interview guide by giving all participants identical questions for both the interview and focus group discussion. The researcher also ensured that all Church records obtained are in line with the study's specific objectives and are well maintained.

## IV. FINDINGS

### Impact of Evangelism on Church Growth and Community Engagement

For a Church to exist there must be a community involved since a Church emerges from the community itself the members becoming the congregants who attend. Evangelism impacts the Church growth through members increase and retaining the remaining ones. Community engagement takes place through the activities that are carried out by the Church.

### Ways in which evangelism activities have influenced Church growth

Evangelism activities carried out in the Church are expected to influence Church growth positively. Acts 2:41;47 after evangelism took place, many people accepted Christ having 3,000 baptized and devoted themselves to apostles teachings and ways. When the respondents were asked on ways in which evangelism activated have influenced Church growth various responses were given.

Respondent N said:

Evangelism activities have helped in the Congregation growth due to the increase of people. When carried out frequently, you find that the number of people has increased. A good example is the evangelism that we have just carried out not long ago. A parish in our Congregation normally has very few people but the Sunday after evangelism, many people attended. Some we baptized, others received confirmation while others were welcomed back. This motivates other people to come to Church (Interviewed, August 2025).

The respondent stated that evangelism activities contribute significantly to Congregational growth through an increase in Church attendance. They explained that the number of times evangelism is carried out can reflect the growth rate. They gave an example of a parish within their Congregation that usually had very few members, but after a recent evangelism program, attendance on the following Sunday increased markedly. During that service, some individuals were baptized, others received confirmation, and others who had drifted away were welcomed back. The respondent noted that such outcomes encourage even more people to attend Church.

Most times when evangelism is done, be it be open air, home visitations or youth evangelism, Church growth is expected. Evangelism is not only limited to the non-Christians or aimed at gaining new Christians but also as a way of getting to the back sliders. When asked respondent O added:

In our Church the influence is not that big as most of the time evangelism is done to our own members who no longer go or are not active in Church. When evangelizing most of the time we concentrate on the backsliders and people we know and few times do we go to evangelize to total strangers therefore the impact on Church growth is not big (Interviewed, August 2025).

The respondent concludes that evangelism to new contacts in the Congregation is not significant as it mostly focuses on backsliders and inactive members. When the Church only concentrates on the backsliders, Church growth slacks as they only sought the familiar faces leaving the non-Christians limiting its growth potential.

Not every evangelism bears fruits or have tangible results. Sometimes evangelism can be done but not gain new members. One respondent critically commented:

Evangelism has been done many times in our Congregation and many times I have not seen new members. I have never taken part in evangelism activities because it is for those in evangelism department but I see them doing it and see no new members on Church on Sunday (Interviewed, August 2025).

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The respondent observed that despite frequent evangelistic activities, no visible church growth has resulted, as new members are not joining Sunday services. They also revealed a perception that evangelism is the exclusive role of the evangelism department, which has discouraged their own participation. Despite the observation, they reported that evangelism efforts have not led to noticeable growth, since no new members are seen in Church on Sundays after such activities.

### How evangelism helped relationships between the Church and the community

Jesus commanded his disciples to go all over the world and make disciples (Matt 28:19-20). Acts 2:6 people came together to witness what was happening among the disciples and many ended up being among them. Respondents were asked how evangelism has helped relationships between the Church and the community. This is what respondent B said:

The Church is part of a larger community thus works close with the community. When there is a funeral in the community, the Church also participates and contributes in various ways such as cooking, financial support and even emotional. This greatly strengthens the relationship between the community and the Church (Interviewed, August 2025).

The respondent explained that the Church is part of a larger community and therefore works closely with it. They highlighted funerals as an example, noting that the Church participates in various ways such as providing food, financial support, and emotional comfort. According to the respondent, these acts of involvement greatly strengthen the relationship between the community and the Church.

### How evangelism helped the Church meet people's social or emotional needs

When the respondents were asked to give their views on how evangelism helped the Church meet people's social or emotional needs various answers were given.

One of the respondent noted that evangelism at Kihesa Kilolo Congregation has extended beyond spiritual proclamation to include social and emotional care for the people. Respondent 4 from the women group discussion said:

The Church has helped in meeting social and emotional needs in various ways. When someone in the community has a problem, the Church goes to them pray to for them, offer comfort and material needs if required. This helps the people not to feel lonely and that someone somewhere cares for them. (FGD, August 2025).

The respondent attests to the church being part of the larger community playing its role. Whenever someone faces a problem, the Church responds by visiting them, praying for them, offering comfort, and providing material support when necessary. According to the respondent, this makes people feel less lonely and reassures them that someone cares for them.

Another respondent emphasized the role of the Church as a social avenue within the community for people to get together. Respondent 3 from the youth group discussion added:

The Church is made up of people in the same community who come together to worship. This means that the Church is part and parcel of the community as it is made up of the people and aims to serve the people. When there are special events or ceremonies in Church, people are invited to come together socialize and participate in the event as one even if they are not Church members (FGD, August 2025).

The respondent explained that the Church is made up of people from the same community who come together to worship. For this reason, the Church is part and parcel of the community, existing to serve its people. They further stated that during special events or ceremonies, the Church invites all community members including those from different faiths and standings to attend, socialize, and share in the occasion as one.

## V. DISCUSSION

### Way in which evangelism activities have influenced church growth

Findings reveal directly that the presence of evangelism has led to increase in the church attendance. The respondent links the frequency of evangelistic activities with growth sustainability. Evangelism should not be a one-time event but rather a

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continuous trend in the church. They also observed that the church does not only grow numerically but also spiritually due to the presence of baptisms, confirmation and even reintegration of members that had backslide. New covenants are formed while the old are renewed strengthening the congregation.

McGavran's (1970, 1980) foundational church growth theory affirms that evangelism acts as a catalyst for not only numerical growth in the church but also as a catalyst for discipleship. To him evangelism is more of spiritual growth in Christ than numerical church growth which is confirmed by the baptism, confirmation and reintegration experienced in Kihesa Kilolo congregation. Nhanala (2014) adds that when there is evangelism testimonies of fruits bore, people become more willing to fully invest themselves in advancing evangelism work to more people and places.

The findings confirms that frequent and well-organized evangelism is essential for congregational growth as it strengthens the church numerically and spiritually ensuring expansion both physical and spiritual.

The findings reveals a critical limitation in evangelism strategies as its influence is not as big as it should be nor as expected since they concentrate more on known members neglecting strangers and non-believers. This creates the illusion that evangelism functions more as maintenance than expansion becoming less community engaging. This resonates with McGavran's (1970) who warns that evangelism should target all groups of people and if directed to only the unchurched the church risks not only numerical growth but also spiritual. He stresses that it is important to integrate new blood in the church as it leads to a perfect blend in social, culture and geographical boundaries for the members. Towns (1970) adds that a health church community integrates both in-reach and outreach.

When the church plays safe with evangelism, church growth hits stagnation. By engaging new people from different backgrounds can the church grow to its potential and by then will all be part of the kingdom of God. By seeking new converts and the unreached in the community can the church say to be doing evangelism. With reference from Matthew 28:19-20, 'go and make disciples of all nations implied reaching out beyond the existing border or network. By only doing evangelism to the known people it limits reaching new people and making more disciples especially those that have never encountered the gospel before.

From the respondents' observation, there is need for the congregation to have more strategies that accommodate evangelism for both the restoration and expansion. For the church to achieve both sustainability and broader missional influence, there is need for strategies that accommodates all. Empirical evidence from Kenyan churches (Ngala, 2021) confirms that evangelism directed primarily at insiders is less impactful on numerical growth compared to strategies that deliberately seek new converts in unreached communities.

From the findings it is revealed that although evangelistic activities take place, no new members are seen to attend church. It offers a contrasting perspective on the effectiveness of evangelism. Compared to the other respondent who have associated evangelism to church growth, this respondent perceives little to no significance. This aligns with Blythe (2018) who warns that not all times do evangelistic activities lead to new members. He warns that without persistent follow-up those that were evangelized to may not necessarily transition into regular members. An empirical study done by Johnston (2016) quoted Malphurs (1998) by saying that "quality churches do not stay small for long because the services offered there are of high quality and are aimed at winning lost souls back to Christ. Many small churches with low quality lack quantity thus evangelism remains on the down low".

From the respondent, it is also revealed that possibly many more members are no directly engaged in evangelistic activities but rather left for the evangelistic department. This does not align with Jesus command to and make disciples as in matt 28:19-20 which is a calling to all people. This also does not align with McGavran's emphasis on the involvement of the whole church while doing evangelism. Lack of individual participation from the member's leads to the church more spectators than active members limiting pits growth potential. Also if members see little fruit from evangelism, they may lose motivation and further distance themselves from participation, creating a cycle of low involvement and limited results.

**How evangelism helped relationships between the church and the community**

From the response given it is illustrated how the church is socially engaged when it comes to the community. Rather than just being a place to carry out payers and worship, it proves its practical engagement and solidarity during important life

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events for the people in the community. By cooking, contributing financially, and offering emotional support, the church embodies the message of Christ's love in tangible ways.

From the findings, it is revealed that there is importance in contextual evangelism when involved in community life. In Africa, events such as funeral bring more people together from all walks of life without discrimination. It breaks all social, age, religious and status boundaries. By the church participating it brings out its relevance in not only the people but also the community. By church participation, opportunities for direct proclamation of the gospel are open leading to indirect evangelism.

### How evangelism helped the church meet people's social or emotional needs

The significance of a person in the community is seen when they participate in event, same as the church. With due time the church builds a relationship based on trust and goodwill with the community members leading to acceptance of not only physical needs but also spiritual.

From the response given it is noted that evangelism in the congregation is understood to provide a combination of pastoral care and social support. This is in line with Jesus's ministry whereby he not only proclaimed and taught the word of God but also did acts of compassion such as healing, comforting the broken hearted and feeding masses. In this concept, evangelism is not only about verbal teachings but also but also catering for other needs.

Empirical reviews emphasize that such evangelism strategies are effective in African perspectives. Nhanala (2014) emphasizes that incarnational, responding to the social realities of poverty, illness, and marginalization in order to be credible. Similarly, Ogunewu (2014) observes that communities are more receptive to the gospel when they see it demonstrated through care, compassion, and solidarity. The respondent's example of the church visiting people in times of difficulty, offering comfort and material support, directly affirms this perspective.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Evangelistic strategies in Kihesa Kilolo Congregation have contributed significantly to both the numerical and qualitative growth of the Church. On the one hand, they have increased attendance, baptisms, confirmations, and the reintegration of backslidden members. On the other hand, they have strengthened fellowship, unity, and the sense of belonging among members. Evangelism has also provided emotional encouragement and social support, showing that it is an effective tool not just for expanding numbers but for nurturing the holistic growth of the Christian community.

## VII. RECOMMENDATION

Finally, there is need for research into the community's perception of evangelism, especially among non-members. Since some respondents noted that evangelism is sometimes received with material expectations, further investigation could examine how communities interpret evangelistic outreach, and how Churches can strike a balance between spiritual proclamation and social support. Such studies would provide a broader understanding of how evangelism is received outside the Church and inform strategies for making it more impactful and contextually relevant.

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