

Collaborative Climate as a Church Growth Mechanism: Insights from Clergy of Pentecostal Churches in Kenya

Samwel Muguna Henry^{a*}, Dr. Nguchie Gathogo^b, Dr. Solomon Munyao^c

^asamuel.henry@students.pacuniversity.ac.ke*

^{a,b,c}School of Leadership, Business and Technology, Pan Africa Christian University, P.O. Box 56875-00200, Nairobi

Abstract

Pentecostal churches have experienced significant growth, yet they have also faced internal divisions, leadership conflicts, and denominational fragmentation. In Kenya, disputes over leadership succession, doctrinal differences, and competition for congregants have often contributed to stunted church growth. This study aimed to provide qualitative insights into collaborative climate as church growth mechanism among Pentecostal churches in Kenya. The study was inspired by collaborative leadership theory. The study employed phenomenological approach. The target population for the study comprised bishops and reverends from Pentecostal churches in Kenya. The study used purposive sampling, selecting 20 key informants based on their leadership positions and direct involvement in church growth strategies. The study utilized key informant interviews with semi-structured interview guides as the primary data collection instrument. The study employed thematic analysis to process and interpret the interview data. Collaborative climate manifested under four overarching themes: inter-denominational partnerships, attitudes towards collaboration, workgroup support, and organizational culture. Collaborative climate was found to be a significant driver of church growth, highlighting the importance of fostering teamwork, partnerships, and a supportive environment. Key elements such as inter-denominational cooperation, workgroup support, mutuality, and a strong organizational culture were identified as enablers of this climate. As people who are at the helm of policy making in churches, it is recommended that Bishops prioritize the development of a collaborative climate and promote humility as key team leadership dimensions within the church.

Keywords: Collaborative Climate, Church Growth, Pentecostal Churches

1. Introduction and Background to the Study

Collaboration entails the conscious and deliberate coming together of individuals, groups, or organizations to work jointly toward shared goals (Castaner & Oliveira, 2020). Effective collaboration extends beyond individual efforts, emphasizing collective partnerships to advance the mission of the church. A collaborative climate is an essential component of leadership, crucial for achieving collective goals (Guzmán et al., 2020). Hamalainen (2020) underscores that collaborative efforts among Pentecostals, including interactions and information exchanges, are vital for fulfilling the Great Commission. According to Northouse (2016), collaboration thrives when team members trust one another, making trust a foundational element of a successful collaborative climate.

A collaborative climate in team leadership signifies a working environment grounded in trust, transparency, consistency between actions and words, and mutual respect among team members (Mosafa et al., 2025). In a thriving collaborative climate, teams demonstrate a clear sense of purpose, unity, and commitment. Their actions align with shared goals, and they eliminate sources of conflict through open, transparent communication. Additionally, successful teams capitalize on diverse skills, assign well-defined roles, and maintain a sharp focus on their objectives (Griffin & Holcomb, 2023). According to Caniels et al. (2019), a high-performing team is built on a strong foundation of collaboration.

Collaborative climate has been defined and explored in various contexts. Kim and Park (2020) described it as the willingness to share knowledge and ideas. Cook and Macaulay (2020) expanded on this by emphasizing

collective flexibility in response to changing demands. Within religious settings, Vulcan (2024) argued that collaborative partnerships that transcend denominational boundaries are essential for advancing the Great Commission. Oladosu (2023) identified key virtues for successful collaboration, including trust, humility, shared goals, and mutuality – values critical for effective ministry work.

Despite reports of steady Pentecostal church growth (Chua et al., 2017), contrasting findings highlight significant challenges. Longhurst et al. (2022) documented a decline in Christianity in the Middle East from 13.6% of the population in 1900 to less than 4% today. Similarly, Dandridge (2020) explored church membership decline in Virginia, USA, identifying poor attendance and a lack of collaborative ministry efforts as contributing factors. These studies reveal gaps, particularly regarding the impact of collaboration on church growth.

In Kenya, Pentecostal churches have experienced significant growth, yet they have also faced internal divisions, leadership conflicts, and denominational fragmentation. Disputes over leadership succession, doctrinal differences, and competition for congregants have often contributed to stunted church growth. These tensions have, in many cases, weakened the collective mission of the church, limiting the potential benefits of collaboration. While global studies have examined collaborative climate in various settings – such as Kapusuz et al. (2021) on psychological empowerment in Turkey and Jatmiko et al. (2021) on team collaboration in Indonesia – there remains limited scholarly attention on how a collaborative climate specifically influences church growth within Kenya's Pentecostal churches. Past research on the problem of church growth in Kenya have focused on church conflict which is a symptom rather than the root cause (Mwabonje, 2019; Thiga et al., 2021). Little is known about how collaboration among Pentecostal clergy in Kenya can mitigate divisions and contribute to sustainable church growth. This study sought to address this gap by investigating the role of a collaborative climate in overcoming church conflicts and fostering growth. By examining clergy perspectives, the study aimed to provide qualitative insights into collaborative climate as church growth mechanism among Pentecostal churches in Kenya.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Literature

The role of collaborative leadership in church growth has been widely explored across different denominational and organizational contexts. Scholars such as Davis Sr. (2021), Osagiede-Bienose and Ubuane (2023), Ng'ang'a (2023), Blake Jr. (2024), McClure (2022), and Hall (2023) have examined various aspects of leadership, stakeholder engagement, and network dynamics in enhancing church effectiveness and expansion. While some studies focus on structured and hierarchical leadership models, others emphasize shared decision-making and clergy collaboration. Additionally, research beyond religious institutions, including studies by Kapusuzi et al. (2021), Younis (2018), and Njenga and Maina (2018), highlights the impact of collaborative climate on organizational performance and psychological empowerment. However, gaps remain in understanding how collaborative leadership functions in Pentecostal churches, particularly in the Kenyan context. This paper critically reviews these studies, highlighting agreements, disagreements, and areas requiring further research.

Davis Sr. (2021) explores collaborative leadership within the Mt. Sinai Seventh-day Adventist Church, emphasizing how shared leadership, open communication, and teamwork among clergy and members enhance church effectiveness. The study finds that cultivating an environment of trust and shared responsibility leads to both spiritual and numerical growth. However, its focus on a single denominational context limits the generalizability of its findings to diverse church settings, particularly Pentecostal churches, which often operate under different leadership structures.

Similarly, Osagiede-Bienose and Ubuane (2023) examine church growth within the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Benin, highlighting the role of structured evangelism, community engagement, and doctrinal consistency. The study finds that hierarchical leadership and doctrinal adherence contribute significantly to church expansion. However, unlike Davis Sr. (2021), who emphasizes internal collaboration, this study focuses on external outreach and evangelism. The structured nature of Catholicism contrasts with the more decentralized and participatory approach seen in Pentecostal churches, presenting a gap that warrants further exploration.

Ng'ang'a (2023) investigates stakeholder influence on church growth within the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Nairobi. The study finds that engagement with church leaders, congregants, and external partners enhances resource mobilization and decision-making, ultimately contributing to growth. While this

study aligns with Davis Sr. (2021) in emphasizing leadership's role, it differs in that it considers external stakeholders as critical players, rather than focusing solely on clergy collaboration. This distinction is important, as Pentecostal churches often rely more on internal leadership collaboration than on structured external stakeholder engagement.

Blake Jr. (2024) examines membership growth strategies in traditional churches, identifying intentional discipleship, community outreach, and relational leadership as key contributors. While the study provides useful insights, it focuses on established church structures rather than the flexible and participatory leadership models commonly found in Pentecostal settings. Unlike Davis Sr. (2021), who emphasizes shared decision-making, Blake Jr. (2024) presents a more traditional hierarchical approach, underscoring the need to investigate how collaborative leadership specifically impacts church expansion within Pentecostal frameworks.

McClure (2022) analyzes network dynamics in congregational sustainability, showing that interchurch collaboration, shared resources, and cooperative leadership foster resilience and growth. This study supports the idea that collaboration strengthens congregational vitality, aligning with Davis Sr. (2021). However, McClure (2022) focuses broadly on interchurch networks rather than internal collaborative climate among clergy within a single denomination. This distinction is important for Pentecostal churches, where internal teamwork may play a more defining role in growth than external partnerships.

Hall (2023) explores collaborative leadership in Bahamian pastoral teams through a transformational leadership lens, emphasizing shared decision-making and clergy support. While the study aligns with Davis Sr. (2021) in recognizing the benefits of collaborative leadership, it is limited by its geographical and denominational focus, making it less applicable to Kenyan Pentecostal churches. Unlike McClure (2022), which examines interchurch networks, Hall (2023) focuses on internal clergy teamwork, making it more relevant to the present study but still contextually different.

Studies outside religious contexts, such as Kapusuzi et al. (2021) in Turkey, Younis (2018) in Egypt, and Njenga and Maina (2018) in Kenya, explore collaborative climate and leadership within workplace environments. Kapusuzi et al. (2021) demonstrate a strong relationship between collaborative climate and psychological empowerment among employees, while Younis (2018) finds that collaboration enhances group performance and moderates the relationship between cognitive diversity and creativity in banking institutions. Njenga and Maina (2018) establish that collaborative leadership fosters innovation, motivation, and ethics in team performance. While these studies validate the positive impact of collaboration in organizational settings, they differ in context from church growth, particularly within Pentecostal churches where spiritual and communal elements influence leadership dynamics.

Synthesizing these studies, it is evident that collaborative leadership is widely recognized as a catalyst for organizational effectiveness and growth. However, there are notable gaps in the literature. Most religious studies focus on structured leadership within hierarchical denominations (Catholicism, Presbyterianism) or single-case settings (Adventist, Bahamian churches), limiting their applicability to Pentecostal churches, which emphasize decentralized and participatory leadership. Additionally, while general organizational studies establish the significance of collaborative climate, they do not account for the unique socio-religious factors that shape leadership in faith-based institutions. The present study addresses these gaps by examining how collaborative climate functions specifically as a church growth mechanism within Pentecostal churches in Kenya, providing a more contextually relevant analysis of clergy teamwork and its impact on church vitality.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This research adopted the theoretical lens of collaborative leadership. Collaborative leadership theory was developed by David Chrislip and Carl Larson in 1994, emphasizing the power of collective effort in achieving shared goals (Barifaijo et al., 2019). The theory posits that leadership is not confined to a single individual but is rather distributed among multiple stakeholders who work together to drive change (Miao & Nduneseokwu, 2025). At its core, the theory suggests that effective leadership emerges from mutual trust, shared vision, and cooperative decision-making, making it highly relevant for contexts that require collective participation (Zhu et al., 2018). Within the church setting, this theory provides a framework for understanding how clergy and congregants can work together to enhance church growth through teamwork, open communication, and joint problem-solving.

The main elements of collaborative leadership theory include shared vision, mutual trust, participatory decision-making, and distributed responsibility (Tigney, 2021). Shared vision ensures that all stakeholders are aligned

with common church growth objectives, fostering unity and direction (Jensen, 2020). Mutual trust promotes a culture where clergy and church members feel valued and respected, enhancing engagement (Mitchell, 2017). Participatory decision-making allows for collective input in strategic planning, ensuring diverse perspectives contribute to church development (Bell & Reed, 2022). Finally, distributed responsibility decentralizes authority, empowering different church leaders and congregants to take active roles in growth initiatives (Parsley, 2023). These elements make collaborative leadership particularly effective in church settings, where leadership is often a shared responsibility among pastors, elders, and lay members (Branson & Martinez, 2023).

In the context of church growth, collaborative leadership theory is particularly applicable because churches thrive when leadership is inclusive and participatory (Bjorke, 2018). A collaborative approach encourages clergy to foster teamwork, delegate responsibilities, and engage congregants in decision-making, leading to a stronger sense of ownership and commitment to church expansion (George, 2017). However, the theory has been criticized for potential inefficiencies in decision-making due to the involvement of multiple stakeholders, which can slow down processes (Young, 2017). Additionally, conflicts may arise when individuals have differing opinions, making it challenging to reach consensus (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Despite these criticisms, the theory remains highly relevant in dynamic church environments where cooperation and shared leadership are essential for sustained growth.

3. Methodology

The study employed phenomenological approach to explore the role of collaborative climate in church growth based on clergy experiences. This design was suitable because it allowed for in-depth exploration of lived experiences and insights from bishops and reverends, who are key decision-makers in Pentecostal churches (Bailey & Bailey, 2021). The target population for the study comprised bishops and reverends from Pentecostal churches in Kenya, as they play a crucial role in church leadership and decision-making. The study used purposive sampling, selecting participants based on their leadership positions and direct involvement in church growth strategies (Campbell et al., 2020). This method ensured that only knowledgeable and experienced clergy were included, enhancing the relevance and depth of the findings. The sample size was determined by thematic saturation, meaning interviews continued until no new insights emerged, ensuring data sufficiency (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The study utilized key informant interviews (KIIs) with semi-structured interview guides as the primary data collection instrument. Semi-structured interviews were ideal because they allowed for guided yet flexible discussions, enabling participants to share their perspectives freely while ensuring that critical themes related to collaborative leadership and church growth were covered (Karatsareas, 2022). Open-ended questions encouraged detailed responses and contextual insights, making this method effective for capturing clergy experiences and leadership strategies.

The research followed a systematic process, beginning with obtaining necessary approvals and scheduling interviews with selected bishops and reverends. Participants were briefed about the study's objectives, and informed consent was obtained before conducting interviews. The interviews were conducted in neutral settings or via virtual platforms, depending on participants' availability. Responses were recorded with permission and later transcribed for analysis. The research procedures ensured consistency, reliability, and respect for participants' time and confidentiality.

The study employed thematic analysis to process and interpret the interview data. The transcribed interviews were carefully reviewed, and key themes and patterns related to collaborative leadership and church growth were identified. Thematic coding was used to categorize responses, ensuring that emerging trends and insights were systematically analysed (Nowell et al., 2017). This method was suitable because it allowed for deep interpretation of qualitative data, making it easier to understand the impact of collaborative leadership on church growth.

Ethical integrity was upheld throughout the study by ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Participants were fully briefed on the study's purpose, and their identities were anonymized to protect their privacy. Additionally, the study ensured data security, storing interview recordings and transcripts in encrypted files accessible only to authorized researchers. These ethical considerations enhanced the study's credibility and safeguarded the rights of all participants.

4. Findings

The characteristics of the surveyed individuals comprised 20 religious leaders, of whom 17 were men (85%) and 3 were women (15%). Their ages varied between roughly 30 and 80 years, with the majority falling within the mid-40s to late 60s. Every participant was married, with household sizes ranging from 2 to 8 children ($M = 3.7$). Regarding experience in leadership, most had been involved in ministerial roles for over two decades, with the shortest tenure recorded at 7 years and the longest extending to 56 years. The respondents occupied diverse leadership positions, including senior overseers (30%), bishops (40%), pastors (25%), and reverends (5%), with some responsible for as many as 60 congregations. Several had participated in church establishment efforts, collectively founding more than 100 congregations, while others contributed to leadership mentorship and capacity development initiatives. Collaborative climate manifested under four overarching themes: interdenominational partnerships, attitudes towards collaboration, workgroup support, and organizational culture as shown in table 1.

Table 1 Thematic Analysis

Interview responses	Codes	Themes	
Respondent #3: "It is in partnership that we fulfil Christ's prayer for unity."	Partnerships	Inter-denominational partnerships	
Respondent #7: "EAPC cooperates with other denominations in building the body of Christ. We all need each other."	Cooperates		
Respondent #13: "We are involved in interdenominational collaborations, including seminars under the Kenya National Congress of Pentecostal Churches."	Need each other Collaborations		
Respondent #19: "Just last week...we had a joint crusade."	Joint crusade		
Respondent #15: "Collaboration with other churches helps us extend our reach, especially in community projects."	Collaborations		
Respondent #5: "Collaboration is crucial, but some churches are hesitant due to differing theological interpretations."	Collaboration crucial	Attitudes towards collaboration	
Respondent #8: "It's about mutual respect. When that's there, collaboration is very fruitful."			
Respondent #10: "You will understand that you require some other measures of faith...you have to get them from different denominations."			Very fruitful Not much
Respondent #12: "We do but not so much...because of the challenge of doctrine."			A lot together
Respondent #17: "If we are willing to set aside our differences, we can achieve a lot together."			
Respondent #2: "Our work groups are the backbone of our operations; they handle everything from planning to execution."	Backbone	Workgroup support	
Respondent #9: "I went on leave, left the teams to work...I came back, and everything is intact."	Intact		
Respondent #13: "One will put into flight a thousand, two will put into flight ten thousand."	Trust		
Respondent #18: "I trust my team to keep things moving when I'm not around."	Joint effort		
Respondent #16: "It's a joint effort that ensures the ministry runs smoothly."			
Respondent #4: "The culture here is all about working together for the good of all our congregations."	Working together	Organizational culture	
Respondent #6: "This place is ABC Pastors' Network. My pastors and I are part of it. We are united as we work together to ensure the growth of the church."	United		
Respondent #9: "In the past, churches were a bit more closed in, but we have become more inclusive over time."	Inclusive		
Respondent #11: "We value open communication, and it makes partnerships easier to manage."	Open communication		
Respondent #14: "It's a culture of unity and support that has developed over years."	Unity		

Theme #1: Interdenominational Partnerships

Interdenominational partnerships are integral to fostering a united approach to advancing the church's mission. The findings indicate that collaborations across denominations enhance the sharing of resources, mutual support, and collective spiritual growth. These partnerships often involve joint activities such as crusades, training, and leadership seminars, enabling the church to reach a broader audience and demonstrate unity within the body of Christ. Challenges to these partnerships occasionally arise due to doctrinal differences, but the overall sentiment highlights their importance in promoting church growth.

It is in partnership that we fulfil Christ's prayer for unity." (Respondent #3)

"EAPC cooperates with other denominations in building the body of Christ. We all need each other." (Respondent #7)

"We are involved in interdenominational collaborations, including seminars under the Kenya National Congress of Pentecostal Churches." (Respondent #13)

"Just last week...we had a joint crusade." (Respondent #19)

"Collaboration with other churches helps us extend our reach, especially in community projects." (Respondent #15)

The findings are consistent with Caniels et al.'s (2019) assertion that interdenominational partnerships foster unity and enhance collective efforts. Respondents highlighted how collaborations across denominations facilitate resource sharing, mutual support, and collective spiritual growth, which aligns with the literature's claim that collaborative climates unite diverse groups to work towards common goals. The joint activities such as crusades and seminars mentioned by respondents reflect Younis's (2018) argument that collaboration within teams enhances overall performance and mission fulfilment. Although doctrinal differences were acknowledged, the overall sentiment supports the idea that interdenominational partnerships significantly contribute to church growth.

Theme 2: Attitude towards Collaboration

The general attitude toward collaboration is highly positive, reflecting an acknowledgment of its necessity for the church's growth and mission fulfilment. Respondents noted that collaboration symbolizes unity in faith and is a practical acknowledgment of the interdependence among churches and denominations. While most responses emphasized the benefits, a few highlighted doctrinal misalignments as a barrier to deeper collaboration. This demonstrates an overall openness to collaboration tempered by specific challenges.

"Collaboration is crucial, but some churches are hesitant due to differing theological interpretations." (Respondent #5)

"It's about mutual respect. When that's there, collaboration is very fruitful." (Respondent #8)

"You will understand that you require some other measures of faith...you have to get them from different denominations." (Respondent #10)

"We do but not so much...because of the challenge of doctrine." (Respondent #12)

"If we are willing to set aside our differences, we can achieve a lot together." (Respondent #17)

The findings are consistent with Mitchell's (2017) assertion that collaboration fosters trust and mutual respect, which are key to the success of any team. Respondents emphasized that collaboration symbolizes unity in faith, reflecting the literature's view that a collaborative climate is essential for church growth. However, the occasional mention of doctrinal differences as a barrier aligns with the literature's recognition that such challenges can hinder deeper collaboration, as noted by Mattessich and Johnson (2018). Despite these barriers, the general openness to collaboration supports the idea that the benefits of working together outweigh the challenges, as indicated by the literature.

Theme #3: Workgroup Support

Work group support plays a pivotal role in sustaining collaborative efforts and enhancing operational efficiency within the church. Respondents frequently noted how teamwork ensures smooth operations and fosters shared spiritual growth. The support provided by teams not only strengthens the church's internal structures but also enhances its capacity for external collaborations, reflecting the critical role of collective effort in achieving organizational goals.

“Our work groups are the backbone of our operations; they handle everything from planning to execution.” (Respondent #2)

“I went on leave, left the teams to work...I came back, and everything is intact.” (Respondent #9)

“One will put into flight a thousand, two will put into flight ten thousand.” (Respondent #13)

“I trust my team to keep things moving when I'm not around.” (Respondent #18)

“It's a joint effort that ensures the ministry runs smoothly.” (Respondent #16)

The findings are consistent with Kapusuz et al.'s (2021) assertion that workgroup support plays a pivotal role in achieving organizational goals and enhancing performance. Respondents emphasized that teamwork strengthens both internal structures and external collaborations, reflecting the literature's claim that a collaborative climate leads to smoother operations and higher performance. Younis's (2018) work on the positive impact of collaboration on group performance is mirrored in the responses that highlight trust and shared responsibility as key factors in sustaining the church's mission and promoting growth. The findings reinforce the critical role of workgroup support in ensuring the success of collaborative efforts.

Theme #4: Organizational Culture

Organizational culture within these churches is heavily characterized by an emphasis on unity, inclusivity, and structured collaboration. The findings reveal that churches often operate within networks that encourage shared responsibilities and collective decision-making. This culture enables smooth transitions and alignment of goals, fostering an environment where individual congregations thrive while contributing to the broader mission of the church.

“The culture here is all about working together for the good of all our congregations.” (Respondent #4)

“This place is ABC Pastors' Network. My pastors and I are part of it. We are united as we work together to ensure the growth of the church.” (Respondent #6)

“In the past, churches were a bit more closed in, but we have become more inclusive over time.” (Respondent #9)

“We value open communication, and it makes partnerships easier to manage.” (Respondent #11)

“It's a culture of unity and support that has developed over years.” (Respondent #14)

The findings are consistent with Caniels et al.'s (2019) assertion that a strong organizational culture based on unity and inclusivity is essential for fostering collaboration. Respondents described a church culture that emphasizes shared responsibilities and collective decision-making, aligning with the literature's view that such environments promote effective collaboration. The focus on open communication and shared goals, as noted by respondents, supports the literature's assertion (Njenga & Maina, 2018) that a collaborative culture enhances organizational performance and drives growth. This cultural foundation not only strengthens internal cohesion but also enables successful interdenominational partnerships, further supporting the church's mission.

5. Conclusion

Collaborative climate was found to be a significant driver of church growth, highlighting the importance of fostering teamwork, partnerships, and a supportive environment. Key elements such as inter-denominational cooperation, workgroup support, and a strong organizational culture were identified as enablers of this climate. A collaborative atmosphere encourages synergy among members and leaders, ensuring that efforts are aligned toward common goals. The study validates collaborative leadership theory which asserts that a collaborative climate enhances team effectiveness, promoting unified commitment and organizational success. Fostering a collaborative climate within Pentecostal churches aligns with theoretical insights, driving growth through enhanced teamwork and aligned organizational objectives. This emphasizes the critical role that collaboration plays in creating a growth-oriented environment within Pentecostal churches.

As people who are at the helm of policy making in churches, it is recommended that Bishops prioritize the development of a collaborative climate and promote humility as key team leadership dimensions within the church. The findings indicate that these factors have the strongest positive impact on church growth, with humility fostering a willingness to learn and collaborative climate encouraging inter-denominational partnerships. By creating policies that emphasize the importance of teamwork, mutual respect, and shared learning among church leaders, bishops can cultivate a more effective and growth-oriented environment. Moreover, integrating a focus on integrity and team competence into training programs will help strengthen the leadership capacity within their constituents, fostering long-term church growth.

The research demonstrates that mutuality is a key collaborative leadership mechanism. Congregants can actively contribute by embracing the church's core values, promoting a culture of respect, collaboration, and mutual support within the church community. Their participation in team activities and willingness to collaborate with others will directly influence the church's overall growth. Congregants should also encourage leadership accountability and demonstrate a commitment to learning alongside church leaders to foster a positive church environment.

Inter-denominational partners play a key role in driving church growth by fostering a collaborative climate. The study emphasizes the significance of inter-denominational partnerships and the positive effect of a collaborative environment on church growth. These partners should actively seek opportunities to work together across denominational lines, sharing resources, insights, and strategies for mutual growth. Collaboration can take the form of joint outreach programs, inter-denominational training, or shared community development efforts, all of which will strengthen the church's collective impact. Their efforts in building a collaborative atmosphere will contribute significantly to the wider success of the church's growth initiatives.

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