



Role of Dialogue in Fostering Visible Unity and Peaceful Coexistence among Protestant Churches in Rwanda: A Case Study of the Western Province

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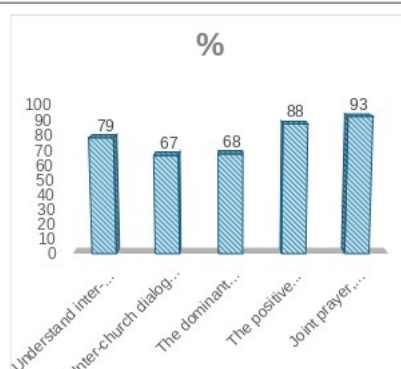
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HIGHLIGHTS

- Inter-church dialogue is understood as a practical and relational process characterised by mutual discussion and cooperation.
- Unity emphasises cooperation among Churches despite doctrinal diversity, reflecting an ecumenical model of "unity in diversity" rather than structural uniformity.
- Joint prayer emerges as the most tangible expression of visible unity.
- Key challenges to unity include biblical misinterpretation leading to disciplinary differences, exclusivism, and, to a lesser extent, historical tensions and leadership competition.
- Divisions are perceived as issues of character and lack of humility, and less as doctrinal matters.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of dialogue in fostering visible unity and peaceful coexistence among Protestant Churches in Rwanda, with a particular focus on the Western Province. Grounded in the theological vision of unity inspired by Jesus Christ, especially the prayer for oneness in John 17, the objectives were to assess denominational understandings of dialogue and unity, to explore existing measures promoting unity and peace, to identify challenges hindering the realization of the "Unity of the Church," and to recommend measures for strengthening dialogue as a pathway to visible unity.

The study adopted a descriptive research design with a mixed-methods approach in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase, analysed separately, and integrated during interpretation. The quantitative design was dominant and measured perceptions of dialogue and visible unity using a structured questionnaire, while the qualitative design consisted of semi-structured interviews that provided contextual explanations and theological reflections from key church leaders.

Employing qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study targeted 10,000 people, with a sample size of 385. The study reveals that a significant majority of respondents (79%) understand inter-church dialogue as a practical and relational process characterised by mutual discussion and cooperation, and that 67% actively participate in inter-church dialogue, addressing both theological and socio-economic issues such as prayer, discipleship programs, peace-building, and family development. Moreover, the dominant understanding of unity (68%) emphasizes cooperation despite doctrinal diversity, reflecting an ecumenical model of "unity in diversity" rather than structural uniformity. 88% of respondents affirm the positive contribution of other denominations to their Christian life. Joint prayer, practiced by 93% of participants, emerges as the most tangible expression of visible unity, reinforcing the spiritual foundation of inter-church relationships. Additionally, collaboration in charitable activities, particularly support for vulnerable populations, demonstrates that unity is already being enacted through shared service.

Despite these strengths, the study identifies key challenges, including biblical misinterpretation leading to disciplinary differences (41%), exclusivism (18%), and, to a lesser extent, historical tensions and leadership competition. These obstacles highlight the ongoing tension between theological identity and communal unity.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that divisions are perceived as issues of character and lack of humility, and less so as doctrinal matters. Consequently, participants propose strategies such as leadership training, transformative dialogue, joint prayer, and the establishment of inter-church committees, and advocate for greater emphasis on moral and spiritual formation, as well as the integration of unity as a central theme in theological education. Overall, the study concludes that while visible unity among Protestant churches in Rwanda is not yet fully realized, substantial foundations already exist, offering a promising pathway toward sustainable, peaceful coexistence through intentional and transformative dialogue.

1. Introduction

From a historical point of view, the unity of Jesus' followers was threatened by competing streams of Christianity, particularly by the rivalry between "apostolic" Christians who honored Peter and John's own community, which regarded the beloved disciple as the guarantor of the church's message and tradition. John's church was also threatened by internal dissension arising from false teaching, as reflected in 1–3 John. As Jesus recognized that his earthly mission was drawing to an end, he prayed for the unity of his disciples so that their visible unity might serve as a living witness to the world (John 17:20–23).

The concepts of dialogue and unity are central to Christian ecclesiology and ecumenical theology. The term *dialogue* derives from the Greek *dialogos*, combining *dia* (movement or exchange) and *logos* (word or speech) (Chapman & Haar, 2016, p. 11). In this sense, dialogue represents a dynamic exchange of ideas and perspectives among participants. In the context of Christian ecumenism, dialogue refers to intentional encounters among churches aimed at fostering mutual understanding, cooperation, and reconciliation. Kinnamon (2003) defines dialogue as a form of conversation that requires a willingness to seek common ground and an openness to learn how God is speaking through one's faith partners (p. 151).

Jesus, as the Son of God, also exemplified a life characterized by continual communion with God through prayer, seeking divine guidance and discerning God's will as essential to his mission. Luke records that Jesus went out to a mountain to pray, and spent the night praying to God (Luke 6:12). In the life of the church, such dialogue and communion can take concrete forms through prayer, fellowship, singing, sharing the pulpit, and participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion (Chapman, 1989, p. 12). These practices provide practical expressions of Christian dialogue and can contribute to strengthening relationships, mutual understanding, and visible unity among churches.

Christian faith in the African landscape in general and in Rwanda in particular has experienced the richness of evangelism and diaconal works done by both missionaries and natives (Aboum, 2006, p. 794). Through discipleship strategies, Rwandans are quantitatively responding to Christian faith in measurable ways, such as church growth and development of the community, where schools, hospitals and health centers are constructed in almost all provinces of Rwanda. Qualitatively, spiritual growth and a biblical hermeneutic of resonance are embraced by Africans (Mwombeki, 2009, pp. 25–35). While church growth among the Protestant churches in Rwanda is a positive aspect, it can at the same time lead to division due to factors like baptism by immersion or by sprinkling and even the place of baptism.

In addition, individualistic denominational preference among the Protestant churches leads to a concept developed by Martin Buber called the "I-It relationship," which

considers the other person as an object to be used or manipulated, a means to an end, rather than a person in themselves (Buber, 1923, p. 67). Within the ecclesial context, denominational fragmentation risks reinforcing exclusionary attitudes and weakening the visible unity of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). Consequently, these dynamics highlight the urgent need for intentional dialogue among Protestant churches in Rwanda. Such dialogue is not merely a pragmatic necessity for peaceful coexistence, but a theological imperative rooted in Christ's prayer for unity (John 17:21), calling the Church to embody reconciliation, mutual recognition, and shared witness.

We aim to conduct this research to investigate and promote effective dialogue for sustainable and visible unity grounded in Jesus' passion for unity. Further, we aim to recommend dialogue and unity at the denominational level, to explore measures taken so far to maintain unity and peace among Protestant churches in Rwanda, to identify the challenges of working in unity, and to recommend dialogue as a practical action for the Protestant churches. We hope that this study will help the Protestant churches to cooperate in serving Rwandan society with a Gospel-centred, monotheistic view and to cooperate in the unity desired by Jesus Christ. This empirical study is a milestone for academic work to connect with church initiatives and create a document for further reference.

There have been many scholars who have written about dialogue for promoting visible unity and peaceful coexistence in the church. For instance, Kärkkäinen (2002) explains that ecumenical dialogue enables churches to rediscover their common identity in Christ while acknowledging doctrinal and cultural differences. Unity, according to Kärkkäinen, should be understood as communion rather than institutional uniformity. Recent Protestant scholarship has also emphasized a "**hermeneutics of difference**," which interprets doctrinal diversity as a result of different historical and cultural contexts rather than as a fundamental contradiction of the gospel. This perspective allows churches to pursue unity without eliminating legitimate theological diversity. Furthermore, Gatwa (2005) examines the role of churches in Rwanda and emphasizes the need for renewed theological reflection and ecumenical cooperation in promoting peace and unity. He argues that churches must move beyond denominational competition and focus on their shared mission of reconciliation and social transformation. This perspective is particularly significant in the Rwandan context, where the churches have both a historical responsibility and a continuing opportunity to contribute to reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Similarly, Denis (2019) highlights the importance of memory, forgiveness, and community dialogue in addressing the legacy of violence in Rwanda. He argues that churches can contribute to healing by creating spaces for truth-telling, dialogue, and reconciliation within communities. Together, these perspectives underscore the importance of ecumenical

cooperation and constructive dialogue among churches as essential means of strengthening reconciliation, peace, and unity in Rwanda.

Despite the growing scholarship on dialogue for visible unity in the churches (Katongole, 2011; Tutu, 1999; Volf, 2010), relatively limited attention has been given to how dialogue among Protestant denominations in Rwanda contributes to visible unity and peaceful co-existence at the local level.

Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship by examining how dialogue among Protestant churches in Rwanda's Western Province fosters visible unity and supports peaceful co-existence. By exploring the perceptions and practices of church leaders and members, the research provides a contextual, theological and practical understanding of how inter-denominational dialogue can strengthen Christian witness and contribute to sustainable peace in Rwanda.

2. Methodology

This section presents the research design and methodological framework of the study, situated within the field of practical/mission theologies. The research design provides a systematic structure for conducting the study, addressing key questions of what, where, how, and with whom the research is undertaken. In line with P. V. Young's (1971) understanding of research design as a logical and organized process, this study integrates qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the dynamics of interdenominational relationships in Rwanda's Western Province. Drawing on insights from Swinton and Mowat (2006), the study emphasizes the importance of context and embodiment in theological inquiry.

This study adopted a descriptive research design using a mixed-methods approach, whereby quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed separately before being integrated during the interpretation of the findings. The mixed-methods design was selected because it enabled the researchers to obtain both measurable evidence from a relatively large sample of church members and in-depth insights from church leaders concerning dialogue and visible unity among Protestant churches in Rwanda. The quantitative component constituted the dominant strand of the study, generating statistical evidence regarding participants' perceptions and practices. The qualitative component, in contrast, complemented the quantitative findings by providing contextual explanations and theological reflections from key informants, while also exploring how participants interpreted their experiences within their lived social contexts (Creswell, 2013, p. 23). The integration of the two strands strengthened the credibility and comprehensiveness of the findings through methodological triangulation.

The study was conducted among Protestant churches located in the Western Province of Rwanda. The target population consisted of approximately 10,000 church

leaders and members drawn from major Protestant denominations operating within the province. The study focused on understanding their perceptions, experiences, and practices regarding inter-church dialogue and visible unity.

In terms of sampling, the study used both purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was applied to select knowledgeable participants, particularly church leaders, who could provide rich and relevant insights. We identified 13 leaders for qualitative interviews. These are: one top leader at the Protestant Council of Rwanda (CPR), dealing with ecumenical relations; six legal representatives of Protestant churches represented in the Western Province, such as the Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Free Methodist churches, to examine their interactions and mechanisms for peaceful coexistence; and six parish pastors selected from the mentioned churches in the Western Province.

Simple random sampling, by contrast, was employed in the quantitative component of the study to select respondents for the questionnaire survey. This approach ensured that members of the selected Protestant churches had an equal opportunity to participate, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the sample and reducing the likelihood of selection bias. Based on the Yamane sampling formula using a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 385 respondents was obtained to ensure adequate representativeness of the target population.

Data were collected using three complementary methods. A structured questionnaire was administered to church members to collect quantitative data concerning their understanding of dialogue, participation in ecumenical activities, perceptions of church unity, and challenges affecting cooperation among Protestant churches.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect qualitative data from selected church leaders. The semi-structured format enabled participants to express their experiences, theological perspectives, and recommendations concerning visible unity, while allowing the researchers to probe further and seek clarification where necessary. This approach provided a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility in exploring issues that emerged during the conversations. According to O'Leary (2009), semi-structured interviews involve the use of predetermined questions while allowing the researcher to introduce additional questions and probes during the interview process. This flexibility enabled the researchers to explore participants' responses in greater depth while maintaining consistency with the main themes of the study.

In addition, a documentary review was undertaken to examine relevant books, scholarly journal articles, church documents, policy reports, and theological publications that provided historical and theoretical perspectives on dialogue, ecumenism, and peaceful coexistence.

Quantitative data obtained through questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages, to summarise respondents' views on dialogue, unity, participation, and challenges. Qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim, organised into meaningful categories, coded, and analysed using thematic analysis. Emerging themes were compared with the quantitative findings to explain, complement, and enrich the statistical results.

To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed several measures to enhance validity and reliability. Content validity was established through expert review of the questionnaire and interview guide, while a pilot study conducted outside the study area helped improve the clarity and suitability of the research instruments. Methodological triangulation was achieved by combining structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and documentary review to corroborate evidence from multiple sources. Reliability was strengthened through standardized data collection procedures, the consistent use of a semi-structured interview guide, and systematic coding and thematic analysis of qualitative data. Furthermore, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced the credibility, dependability, and overall robustness of the study.

To ensure compliance with ethical research principles, all interview participants were assigned pseudonymous codes to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. Accordingly, the interviewees are identified throughout this study by the following codes: AB, AC, AD, CP, CY, EM, EP, GH, GS, KB, KM, LT, and RB. Furthermore, participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all respondents, particularly given the sensitivity of discussing unity and division in a post-genocide context. Data were securely stored, and participants were granted the right to withdraw within a specified timeframe.

Finally, the study underscored its societal and theological impact. It aimed to strengthen interdenominational cooperation in theological matters, inform peacebuilding initiatives, and support national reconciliation efforts. The findings are expected to benefit church leaders, theological institutions, policymakers, and Christian communities. Moreover, the study aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which promotes peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and effective, accountable institutions (United Nations, 2015). In this context, cooperation among diverse Christian groups can contribute to the broader objectives of SDG 16 by promoting peaceful coexistence, dialogue, inclusion, and collaborative action. By working together on common missions, building interfaith coalitions, sharing resources, and amplifying their collective witness, Christian communities can contribute to peacebuilding and social cohesion. Such collaboration demonstrates how visible

Christian unity can extend beyond ecclesial relationships to contribute to wider processes of peaceful coexistence and sustainable peace.

3. Thematic Analysis and Research Findings

This study examined the role of dialogue in fostering visible unity and peaceful coexistence among Protestant churches in Rwanda. The findings demonstrate that inter-church dialogue is both a theological imperative and a practical reality. Across the data, a consistent pattern emerges: unity is relational, dialogue-driven, and expressed through cooperation in both spiritual and social domains. At the same time, the study reveals persistent theological and structural challenges that require intentional and sustained engagement.

3.1 Understanding and Practice of Inter-Church Dialogue and Unity

The findings show that a large majority of respondents (79%) understand inter-church dialogue primarily as mutual discussion and cooperation. This indicates that dialogue is perceived less as an abstract theological exercise and more as a practical and relational process. In addition, 20% associate dialogue with unity in peace, while 17% link it to the sharing of God's Word. These results suggest that dialogue is simultaneously relational, spiritual, and peace-oriented.

Participation in inter-church dialogue is also high, with 67% of respondents reporting active involvement. The issues addressed in these dialogues extend beyond doctrinal concerns to include peace-building, reconciliation, public health, and socio-economic development. This reflects the broader role of churches as social actors. As Swidler (2013) argues, dialogue is not merely conversation but a transformative encounter that fosters mutual understanding and shared action.

Church unity is predominantly understood as cooperation despite doctrinal differences, with 68% of respondents emphasizing this perspective. This finding reflects a mature theological position aligned with the concept of "unity in diversity." Additionally, 38% highlight mutual encouragement and complementarity, while 16% refer to the biblical idea of the Church as one body in Christ. Only a small proportion of respondents (6%) emphasized doctrinal uniformity, indicating that most participants do not regard unity as requiring institutional or doctrinal homogeneity. This finding is consistent with Volf (1998), who argues that Christian unity is grounded in shared participation in Christ rather than in uniform institutional structures. Similarly, ecumenical theologian Raiser (1991) observes that churches often struggle to translate theological agreements into practical cooperation. Historical traditions and institutional structures can therefore continue to reinforce denominational separation, even when churches affirm the principle of Christian unity. The finding consequently suggests that visible unity may be better understood in terms

of shared faith, mutual recognition, dialogue, and practical cooperation than as doctrinal or institutional uniformity.

The study further reveals that 88% of respondents believe other churches positively contribute to their Christian life. These contributions include spiritual growth, social support, and access to essential services such as education and healthcare. This high level of perceived benefit reflects strong interdependence among churches and supports the argument that unity is already present in practical ways. As Wainwright and McPartlan (2017) note, shared ministry and mutual service are among the strongest expressions of Christian unity.

One of the most significant findings of the study is that 93% of respondents have participated in joint prayer with Christians from other churches. This finding indicates that forms of spiritual unity are already deeply established at the grassroots level. Prayer functions as a unifying practice that can transcend doctrinal differences and reinforce believers' shared identity in Christ. Theologically, such understanding resonates with Johannine ecclesiology, in which Christian unity is associated with the communion between the Father and the Son and is extended to the community of believers (John 17:21). This theological perspective is further supported by scholars who argue that Christian unity is grounded in the divine communion of the Trinity (Hietamäki, 2023, pp. 45–47; Kärkkäinen, 2019, p. 102). From this perspective, dialogue can be understood not merely as a practical mechanism for resolving denominational differences but also as a spiritual practice that reflects the relational character of the Triune God. This understanding echoes broader theological scholarship that regards unity as intrinsic to Christian identity and ecclesiology (Schreiter, 2015; Volf, 1998).

Across the interviews, unity is consistently described as a biblical, theological, and practical necessity for the Christian community. LT noted that *"Church unity is essential... achieving it involves dialogue, understanding what they do well, and exploring how they can improve"* (LT, CY, Interview). AB added that *"the way people communicate is a means to find solutions to common problems and strengthen positive relationships,"* suggesting that dialogue nurtures peace, love, and shared mission (AB, Interview).

AC emphasised the theological basis: *"Unity is the opposite of separation, and it is sin that separates us... but the Gospel is the key tool to unite us."* He further connected unity to the Trinity: *"God wanted from the beginning to work in a team"* (AC, Interview). EP similarly affirmed, *"Dialogue is the nature of God. God dialogues within the Trinity, with prophets, and with humanity"* (ER, Interview). CP described unity as *"coming together of Christians who have the common goal of proclaiming Christ and his salvation without division"* (CP, Interview).

3.2 Practical Expressions of Unity through Collaboration

Historically, Protestantism has experienced significant divisions, as reflected in EP's observation: *"Oneness experienced division... the 1054 Schism, the 1517 Reformation brought division."* Such divisions have continued to shape the contemporary Christian landscape, aligning with Anderson's (2021) assessment that Protestant fragmentation remains a significant global ecclesial challenge (pp. 233–234).

In Rwanda, however, the question of Christian unity carries an additional social and theological urgency because church disunity has been associated with the failure of the Church to resist the forces that contributed to the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi (Longman, 2010, pp. 124–126). This concern was explicitly expressed by AC, who stated: *"Genocide took place because of sin... believers had unrepentant sins, and one mark was the will of not standing together as believers."* This testimony underscores the perceived relationship between Christian disunity, moral failure, and the Church's diminished capacity to provide a unified witness in times of social crisis.

The findings further demonstrate that unity is most visibly expressed through collaborative action, particularly in charitable and community-oriented activities. A significant majority of respondents (90%) reported participating in inter-church charitable activities. Among these respondents, 80% reported engaging in activities aimed at supporting poor and vulnerable people, while 52% participated in visiting the sick and prisoners. These findings reflect what Sakupapa (2020) describes as *pragmatic ecumenism*, in which Christian unity is expressed through joint mission and practical cooperation rather than doctrinal uniformity (pp. 67–69). The findings therefore suggest that inter-church cooperation is strongest in areas of social service and compassion, where Christians from different denominations can translate their shared faith into practical expressions of solidarity and care for vulnerable members of society.

From the interviews, participants cited worship exchange, joint projects, charity collaboration, and shared educational and developmental initiatives. LT observed that inter-church cooperation occurs when *"I invite a pastor from another Church to preach"* and when churches share seminaries without doctrinal restrictions (LT, Interview). AB added cooperation in *"worship services, charity, Bible teaching, nation-building, and joint projects"* (AB, Interview).

AC highlighted community outreach: *"We go to hospitals and prisoners... perpetrators wrote letters asking forgiveness"* (AC, Interview). EM described long-standing ecumenical cooperation: *"Kibogora Hospital serves all people... choirs, Bible Society gatherings, and joint revival meetings bring churches together."* CPR emphasized ecumenical advocacy and prayer: *"We write statements to the Government... we hold ecumenical prayer and organize church visits"* (CPR, Interview).

These findings reflect a theology of service (*diakonia*), in which Christian unity is expressed through practical acts of love, solidarity, and care for others. Such an understanding resonates with Katongole (2011), who argues that African ecclesial unity is often most effectively embodied through shared practices of service and community engagement. In this sense, service can provide a relatively inclusive space in which Christians from different denominations work together toward common social and humanitarian goals, thereby reducing the divisiveness of doctrinal differences. Furthermore, Moltmann (1977) emphasizes that the unity of the church is grounded in the relational nature of the Triune God. From this theological perspective, unity is not merely an institutional arrangement but a relational reality that is expressed through participation, communion, and mutual engagement.

The interview data reinforce this perspective, showing that unity is practiced through shared worship, pulpit exchanges, joint seminars, and community outreach. These practices consistently demonstrate that dialogue is indispensable to achieving and sustaining church unity. Participants described dialogue not simply as conversation but as an intentional and relational process that nurtures mutual understanding, reconciliation, and cooperation in mission (Swidler, 2013). Thus, dialogue provides a practical and theological framework through which churches can move beyond denominational boundaries and translate their shared commitment to Christian unity into concrete forms of fellowship, service, and common mission.

3.3 Challenges to Inter-Church Unity

Despite the strong evidence of cooperation, the study identifies several challenges. While 58% of respondents reported no major challenges, a significant 39% acknowledged the existence of obstacles to inter-church cooperation.

The most prominent challenge identified by respondents, reported by 41%, was the misinterpretation of the Bible, which contributes to differences in doctrine and church discipline. This finding highlights the central role of biblical interpretation in shaping ecclesial divisions and suggests that disagreements over the interpretation and application of Scripture can become significant barriers to Christian unity. In addition, 18% of respondents identified exclusivism as a major barrier, indicating that some churches continue to maintain attitudes of denominational superiority or exclusivity. Smaller proportions of respondents identified historical conflicts (5%) and leadership competition (4%) as challenges to inter-church unity. These findings suggest that the obstacles to visible unity are not solely doctrinal but also involve ecclesial attitudes, institutional interests, historical experiences, and leadership dynamics.

Another significant challenge concerns leadership structures and theological formation. Mugambi (1995) argues that African Christianity must address questions of leadership, theology, and social responsibility as part of the

broader task of reconstruction and transformation. This perspective is relevant to the present findings because effective ecumenical cooperation requires church leaders who are equipped to engage theological differences constructively, promote mutual recognition, and prioritize the common mission of the church over denominational competition. Consequently, strengthening theological formation and cultivating collaborative forms of church leadership may be important strategies for overcoming barriers to visible unity among Protestant churches in Rwanda.

The interviews with church leaders highlight several obstacles. LT noted obstacles in "*dress code, doctrines, and leadership politics*" (LT). AB added tensions arising from "*titles like apostles, bishops, and names of pastors*," as well as conservative doctrinal boundaries (AB). AC described "*bad perceptions... competition due to lack of theological knowledge*" (AC). EM pointed to "*misunderstandings, competition, false teachings, and poaching of Christians*" (EM). ER expanded on deeper cultural issues: "*mindset of donor dependency... Kirazira culture... denominational traditions exclude others*" (ER). CPR mentioned "*competition, selfishness, and lack of resources*" (CP).

These findings are consistent with Avis (2018), who observes that denominational identity can become a barrier to Christian unity when it becomes detached from the church's shared mission. Similarly, African theologians have highlighted the ways in which denominational competition and doctrinal misunderstandings can hinder ecumenical relationships and cooperation (Mbennah, 2016; Molobi, 2011, pp. 141–142; Ndahiro, 2020).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that strengthening visible unity requires churches to move beyond denominational self-interest and to recognize their shared identity and mission in Christ. In the Rwandan context, this may involve creating spaces for sustained theological dialogue, mutual learning, and practical cooperation across denominational boundaries.

Overall, the interviews with Protestant church leaders provide a deeper theological and practical grounding to the quantitative findings of the study. While the survey data revealed high levels of participation in dialogue (67%), joint prayer (93%), and charitable collaboration (90%), the interviews explain *why* these practices exist and *how* they are sustained. They move the discussion from observable practices to underlying convictions, motivations, and leadership dynamics.

A central insight emerging from the interviews is that unity is understood not merely as an institutional arrangement but as a biblical and theological imperative. Church leaders consistently grounded unity in the nature of God, particularly in the relational life of the Trinity. Unity, therefore, is not optional; it reflects God's own being and mission. One leader emphasized that division is rooted in sin, while the Gospel functions as the primary force of

reconciliation. This theological framing aligns closely with the broader Christian tradition, as articulated by Volf, who argues that unity flows from participation in the life of the Triune God.

Closely related to these findings is the strong emphasis placed on dialogue as a primary pathway to Christian unity. Church leaders described dialogue not simply as conversation but as a transformative and relational process through which churches can understand one another, address misunderstandings, and build mutual trust. This insight complements the survey finding that 79% of respondents view dialogue as a form of mutual cooperation, reinforcing the argument that dialogue is both widely understood and actively practiced among Protestant Christians in Rwanda. In line with Swidler (2013), dialogue can be understood as a process that fosters mutual openness, relational understanding, and a shared vision rather than merely facilitating an exchange of ideas. Thus, dialogue provides an important foundation for overcoming denominational barriers and cultivating relationships that can contribute to visible Christian unity.

Another key theme emerging from the interviews is that unity is closely connected to Christian mission and common witness. Church leaders emphasized that churches are called to proclaim Christ together and to serve their communities collectively. Unity, therefore, should not be understood as an end in itself but also as a means of enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of Christian witness. This perspective resonates with the survey finding that 88% of respondents recognized the benefits of engagement with other churches in their Christian lives. When churches collaborate in mission and service, they embody a visible and compelling expression of the Gospel and demonstrate the practical significance of their shared identity in Christ (Newbiggin, 1953). In this way, ecumenical cooperation becomes both an expression of Christian unity and a means through which the church can strengthen its witness and contribution to society.

The interviews also highlight practical expressions of unity, which closely mirror the quantitative findings. Leaders point to shared worship, pulpit exchange, joint seminars, and collaborative social ministries as key practices. Particularly significant is the emphasis on charity and community outreach, including hospital ministry, prison visits, and support for vulnerable populations. These practices correspond with the 90% participation rate in inter-church charitable activities and demonstrate that unity is most tangible when expressed through service. This supports the argument of Katongole that, in African contexts, unity is often most effectively lived out through shared practices of care and solidarity.

A distinctive contribution of the interview findings is their emphasis on reconciliation and healing, particularly within Rwanda's post-genocide context. Church leaders recounted instances in which collaborative ministry had facilitated forgiveness, restored relationships, and created

opportunities for renewed interaction between victims and perpetrators. These accounts suggest that inter-church dialogue is not merely an ecclesial practice but also has significant social and restorative dimensions. By creating spaces in which people can encounter one another, listen to different experiences, and work toward restored relationships, dialogue can contribute to processes of healing within communities. In this sense, Christian unity can become a vehicle for contributing to broader processes of social reconciliation and national healing. This perspective resonates with Schreiter (2015), who presents reconciliation as a central dimension of the Church's mission in contexts marked by conflict and social fragmentation. The findings therefore suggest that ecumenical dialogue in Rwanda has the potential to extend beyond institutional cooperation and contribute to the wider task of rebuilding relationships and fostering peaceful coexistence.

At the same time, the interviews provide a nuanced understanding of challenges to unity. While survey respondents identified doctrinal differences (41%) and exclusivism (18%) as major barriers, leaders expand on these issues by highlighting concerns about theological inconsistency, leadership identity, organizational complexity, and resource constraints. These challenges reveal that unity requires ongoing negotiation and intentional effort. However, leaders also stress that diversity need not be divisive. When approached with humility and mutual respect, differences can become opportunities for learning and growth.

Importantly, the interviews reinforce the idea that leadership plays a decisive role in shaping inter-church relations. Leaders are responsible for modelling dialogue, fostering cooperation, and guiding congregations toward unity. Their attitudes, decisions, and practices significantly influence whether unity is strengthened or undermined. This insight supports the survey finding that leadership dialogue (42%) is considered the most effective strategy for promoting unity.

Finally, the interviews underscore that dialogue functions as a multidimensional tool— theological, relational, and practical. It enhances understanding, facilitates cooperation, prevents conflict, and promotes reconciliation. In the Rwandan context, dialogue is also aligned with national values of unity and peace-building, making it both a religious and civic responsibility. Overall, the interview findings deepen and confirm the quantitative results, presenting a coherent picture in which dialogue is central to achieving and sustaining visible unity among Protestant churches.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how dialogue can promote visible unity among Protestant churches in Rwanda, particularly in the Western Province, as a means of fostering peaceful coexistence. The findings demonstrate that

significant progress has already been made in cultivating inter-church relationships characterized by cooperation, shared spiritual practices, and joint social engagement. High levels of participation in dialogue (67%), joint prayer (93%), and charitable collaboration (90%) indicate that unity is not merely aspirational but already practiced in meaningful ways.

Both survey data and interview findings consistently show that dialogue is understood not simply as a theological concept but as a practical instrument for reconciliation, peace-building, and community development. Churches actively engage in dialogue to address both spiritual and societal challenges, reflecting their dual role as faith communities and agents of social transformation.

The research further highlights that Protestant churches in Rwanda have embraced a model of "unity in diversity." With 68% of respondents affirming their willingness to cooperate despite doctrinal differences, the findings suggest that unity is understood primarily in relational and functional terms rather than as requiring institutional or doctrinal uniformity. This reflects an ecclesiological understanding that prioritizes shared mission, mutual respect, and practical cooperation while allowing legitimate theological and denominational differences to remain. The widespread practice of joint prayer and collaborative service further reinforces this perspective, demonstrating that significant expressions of visible unity are already present at the grassroots level. This finding resonates with Gatebuka (2025), whose work highlights the importance of recognizing and negotiating diversity within the Rwandan ecclesial context as part of the pursuit of Christian unity.

However, the study also reveals that challenges persist. Doctrinal differences arising from biblical interpretation (41%), exclusivist attitudes (18%), and leadership or structural tensions continue to affect the depth of unity. These challenges indicate that unity is not only a theological or organizational issue but also an ethical and spiritual one. The strong emphasis on Christian values such as humility, love, and mutual respect suggests that sustainable unity must be rooted in transformed character as much as in institutional strategies.

The interview findings further enrich this conclusion by demonstrating that Christian unity is grounded in a theological vision rooted in the Trinity and expressed through mission, service, reconciliation, and mutual relationship. Church leaders affirmed that dialogue is indispensable, not only as a means of addressing conflict and misunderstanding but also as a spiritual discipline that nurtures trust, strengthens relationships, and enables a shared Christian witness. In the Rwandan context, shaped by the enduring legacy of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, this commitment to dialogue carries particular theological and social significance. By creating opportunities for encounter, mutual understanding, and cooperation across denominational boundaries, dialogue can contribute to the Church's vocation of reconciliation

and to broader processes of social healing. This perspective resonates with Banyanga (2017), who emphasizes the importance of Christian engagement in addressing the challenges of reconciliation and peacebuilding in Rwanda.

In light of these findings, the study concludes that dialogue remains the most viable and effective pathway toward strengthening visible unity among Protestant churches in Rwanda. Such dialogue must be continuous, inclusive, and grounded in both theological reflection and practical engagement. Leadership plays a central role in modelling and sustaining this process, while theological education institutions are called to integrate unity and reconciliation more intentionally into their formation programs.

Ultimately, visible unity is not an optional ideal but a theological imperative rooted in the mission of Jesus Christ. In Rwanda, this unity extends beyond ecclesial boundaries to contribute to peaceful coexistence and social transformation. By deepening dialogue and fostering a culture of mutual respect and shared mission, Protestant churches can continue to serve as vital agents of healing, unity, and hope.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

5.1 Establish Continuous Ecumenical Dialogue Platforms

Regular and structured inter-church dialogue forums should be institutionalized, particularly within umbrella bodies such as the Protestant Council of Rwanda (CPR). These platforms should address doctrinal, relational, and practical issues while fostering sustained communication and trust among churches.

5.2 Strengthen Ecumenical and Theological Education

Theological institutions should intentionally integrate ecumenical theology, unity, and reconciliation into their curricula. Emphasis should be placed on biblical hermeneutics, shared Christian doctrines, and character formation to address theological misunderstandings and reduce division.

5.3 Promote Joint Community and Development Projects

Churches should expand collaboration in areas such as education, healthcare, youth programs, and social outreach. Shared projects reinforce unity through action and demonstrate the Church's collective commitment to societal transformation.

5.4 Address Cultural and Perception Barriers

Workshops and training programs should be developed to address cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and exclusivist mindsets. Promoting inter-denominational respect and understanding will help overcome deeply rooted barriers to unity.

5.5 Invest in Capacity Building for Sustainable Unity

Churches and ecumenical bodies should invest in training dialogue facilitators, establishing inter-church committees, and securing resources to support ongoing unity initiatives. Strong institutional support is essential for sustaining long-term ecumenical engagement.

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