

Faith on the Frontline: Forest Stewardship Activities of the African Church of the Holy Spirit in the Conservation of Malava Forest, Western Kenya

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Abstract- Faith-based organisations increasingly feature in environmental conservation debates, yet their practical stewardship contributions remain under-documented in many African contexts. Malava Forest, a fragment of the Kakamega Forest ecosystem in Western Kenya, continues to decline under pressures such as charcoal burning, firewood collection, grazing and encroachment, even as churches situated within the forest landscape are increasingly called upon to play a mitigating role. It is not clear what forest stewardship activities the African Church of the Holy Spirit (ACHS), the predominant African Indigenous church bordering Malava Forest, has actually undertaken toward conservation. This paper examines the forest stewardship activities that the ACHS has undertaken in its effort towards conserving Malava Forest. The study adopted a descriptive research design and drew on a survey of 248 respondents sampled from ACHS membership using stratified and simple random sampling, supplemented by key informant interviews, focus group discussions and secondary sources. Data were analysed descriptively using SPSS version 26. Findings show that the church has engaged in a wide portfolio of stewardship activities, including environmental teaching, tree planting, rainwater harvesting, Green Gospel preaching, partnership development with government and civil-society actors, community mobilisation, promotion of community members into forest-management roles, use of trusted local leaders (Massenga), monitoring and advocacy, and sustainable management of church-owned land. These activities enjoyed broad, though not always unanimous, community endorsement. The study concludes that the ACHS functions as a credible, trusted intermediary between formal forest governance and forest-adjacent communities. It recommends that the church formalise its environmental ministry and that government and development partners recognise and resource faith-based stewardship as a complement to statutory conservation mechanisms.

Keywords: Forest Stewardship, Faith-Based Conservation, African Church of The Holy Spirit, Malava Forest, Community Participation

I. INTRODUCTION

Forest degradation has been an enduring subject of environmental policy debate since the 1970s, driven largely by anthropogenic pressures such as agricultural expansion, settlement, and resource extraction. Africa has lost forest cover at a rate of roughly 3.4 million hectares annually in recent decades, and Kenya's gazetted forests, including catchment areas such as Mau, Mount Elgon and Mount Kenya, have experienced significant excision and encroachment linked to population growth and weak governance. Malava Forest, a fragment of the only remaining tropical rainforest ecosystem in Kenya, has not been spared this trend, with reports indicating continuing decline attributable to illegal logging and charcoal burning.

Religious institutions have increasingly been recognised as actors capable of either degrading or conserving forest ecosystems, depending on the theological orientation and practical choices of their leadership and membership. Where churches interpret stewardship as a spiritual obligation, they can mobilise built-in networks, moral authority and established gathering structures toward conservation education, tree planting, and advocacy. Christians, including members of the African Church of the Holy Spirit (ACHS), constitute the overwhelming majority of Kenya's population, making the orientation of church congregations toward environmental behaviour a matter of considerable practical significance for national conservation outcomes.

The ACHS is among the predominant African Indigenous Churches in Kakamega County, with a strong presence in the Kabras Division adjacent to Malava Forest. Having split from the Friends Africa Mission/Quakers over a theological controversy concerning pneumatology, the church has developed its own distinct institutional identity and network of member congregations bordering the forest. Despite its proximity to, and evident stake in, the future of Malava Forest, there has been limited empirical documentation of precisely what stewardship activities the church has undertaken, as opposed to what it might be assumed or expected to do.

This gap is significant because policy recommendations for faith-based conservation partnerships cannot be soundly developed without an evidence base describing existing practice. This paper therefore addresses the second objective of a broader study on the church's role in Malava Forest conservation, namely to examine the forest stewardship activities that the African Church of the Holy Spirit has undertaken in its effort toward the conservation of Malava Forest. The corresponding research question guiding this paper is: what forest stewardship activities has the African Church of the Holy Spirit undertaken in its effort toward the conservation of Malava Forest? Answering this question contributes to the broader discourse on faith-based, community-anchored conservation and provides a practical evidence base for church leaders, the Kenya Forest Service, and development partners seeking to strengthen collaborative forest governance in Western Kenya.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This paper draws primarily on the Spiritual Values of Forests Theory, which holds that forests carry spiritual, cultural and metaphysical significance that shapes conservation behaviour. Proponents of this perspective argue that where forests are regarded as sacred or spiritually meaningful spaces, communities are more likely to develop stewardship practices grounded in reverence rather than purely instrumental calculation (Brown & Verschuuren, 2019). Roux et al. (2022), examining evolving forest spiritualities across

Europe and Asia, describe a cyclical pattern in which societies move from an initial stage of forest reverence, through the "taming of nature" associated with modern religion, toward rational, commodified management, before a later "re-spiritualisation" of forests driven by urbanisation and renewed cultural interest. This framework is directly relevant to the present study because it helps explain why an indigenous African church, operating within a still strongly agrarian and spiritually embedded community, might mobilise congregational structures specifically around forest protection rather than treating the forest as a purely economic resource. A limitation of the theory, however, is its tendency to generalise across highly diverse spiritual traditions and to understate the influence of material incentives alongside spiritual motivation, both of which this study's findings suggest operate simultaneously among ACHS members.

A complementary lens is offered by Community-Based Conservation Theory, associated with Agrawal and Gibson (2019), which holds that communities with a genuine stake in natural resources are better positioned than distant bureaucracies to manage them sustainably, provided decision-making is meaningfully decentralised. This theory is useful for interpreting findings on local decision-making, the promotion of community members into management roles, and the use of trusted local leaders, all central themes in the stewardship activities examined here. Its main limitation is an assumption of relatively homogenous community interests, when in practice power dynamics and resource competition within communities, including within a single congregation, can complicate participatory arrangements.

2.2 Empirical Literature

A growing body of empirical work documents the conservation contributions of religious institutions. Daneel (2006) described African Initiated Churches as "vehicles of earth-care," arguing that their embeddedness in local communities gives them a distinctive capacity to translate ecological messaging into practical action, a claim broadly consistent with the present study's finding that the ACHS combines teaching, mobilisation and land-use demonstration in an integrated stewardship programme. Warui and

Kairu (2018), studying the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Limuru Sub-County, found that although the church demonstrated commitment to environmental stewardship at the level of policy and strategy, this commitment had not been effectively cascaded to concrete, monitored action at the local level, a shortfall attributed to limited finances, insufficient clergy awareness of the theological basis for environmental care, and the absence of clear implementation and evaluation mechanisms. The present study's findings on monitoring and advocacy, and on the exclusion of church leaders from policy discussions, echo this concern about the gap between institutional intention and grassroots delivery.

Allen (2018), studying church-based conservation in Tanzania, found that congregants broadly accepted a theological mandate to care for the environment, and that churches had engaged mainly in small-scale protective acts, most commonly tree planting, while their greatest comparative advantage lay in convening and educating congregations rather than in large-scale restoration work. The finding that pastoral willingness to participate strongly shaped programme effectiveness aligns closely with this study's identification of limited clergy support as a factor shaping the intensity, though not the existence, of ACHS stewardship activity. Oliveira (2017), examining religiosity and adaptive strategies in semi-arid north-eastern Brazil, found that religious commitment could shape risk perception and resource-sharing behaviour in either conservation-positive or conservation-negative directions depending on how spiritual narratives were framed, underscoring that the mere presence of religious institutions near a forest does not guarantee a conservation orientation; deliberate framing, of the kind evident in the ACHS's Green Gospel preaching, appears to matter.

Beyond direct conservation studies, Muriithi et al. (2022) applied a Triple Bottom Line framework to the Anglican Church of Kenya, finding that combining social, financial and environmental programming strengthened congregational loyalty and institutional relevance, while flagging persistent challenges of governance, corruption and limited technological capacity, concerns that resonate with challenges reported by ACHS respondents around transparency,

financial constraint and representation. More broadly, Patwardhan et al. (2021) documented how sacred forest sites in India's Western Ghats have historically depended on cultural taboos and community custodianship for their protection, illustrating a global pattern in which spiritual authority substitutes for, or complements, formal regulatory enforcement, a pattern visible in the present study's findings on the church's advocacy and trust-building role alongside statutory Kenya Forest Service enforcement.

Collectively, this literature suggests that faith-based conservation is neither automatic nor uniform: its effectiveness depends on clergy engagement, the integration of environmental messaging into regular worship, the availability of resources for practical activities, and the extent to which religious institutions are formally included in wider governance structures. These themes directly frame the interpretation of findings presented in Section 4 of this paper, and the identified gap, namely the absence of a documented, activity-level account of ACHS stewardship practice specifically in Malava Forest, is the gap this paper addresses.

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper reports the portion of a broader descriptive, mixed-methods study that addressed the second research objective: examining the forest stewardship activities the African Church of the Holy Spirit has undertaken toward the conservation of Malava Forest. The descriptive design was selected because it is well suited to systematically documenting existing practices, attitudes and behaviours as they occur, without manipulation of variables, and it permits both quantitative and qualitative data to be gathered and triangulated (Kothari, 2004).

The study was conducted in Malava Forest, located in Malava Sub-County approximately 25 kilometres north of Kakamega town. The forest covers 718.8 hectares, comprising natural forest, plantation forest and grassland, and is managed by the Kenya Forest Service in collaboration with Community Forest Associations across three administrative blocks. The ACHS maintains a prominent presence within this landscape, with member congregations including

Bethafaki, Musingu, Tumbeni, Shitirira, Matioli, Malava Forest, Duka Mojar and Mapsto Shilongo.

The target population comprised the 1,820 members of the eight ACHS member churches, including bishops, general secretaries, retired bishops, ordinary members and church elders or trustees. Using the Yamane (1967) formula at a 95 percent confidence level and 5 percent tolerance, a sample size of 328 was computed and allocated proportionately across the eight congregations using stratified sampling, with simple random sampling used to select individual respondents within each stratum. This ensured that every member of the target population had an equal and independent chance of selection. Fieldwork for the survey component analysed in this paper yielded 248 valid, fully completed questionnaire responses, which form the quantitative basis for the findings reported in Section 4.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to senior church administrators and programme personnel, supplemented by an interview schedule used for in-depth key informant interviews with clergy and church leaders, and by focus group discussions. Closed items relevant to stewardship activities were scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), while open-ended items captured qualitative detail on specific activities, conflicts and suggestions. Secondary data, including church records, government publications and prior scholarship, supplemented the primary data and were used to contextualise and cross-check findings. Fieldwork instruments were pre-tested with four randomly selected member churches outside the study area (in Mt. Elgon, Bungoma County) prior to full deployment, and adjustments were made to improve clarity.

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26, generating frequencies and percentages for each Likert-scale item; these are presented as Figures 1 through 33 in Section 4 of this paper. Open-ended responses were thematically categorised as positive, negative, or non-committal to complement the descriptive statistics. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Kibabii University School of Graduate

Studies and a research permit was issued by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained by excluding personally identifying information from questionnaires and by aggregating findings so that no individual respondent or specific congregation could be identified from the reported results.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the forest stewardship activities that the African Church of the Holy Spirit has undertaken in its effort toward the conservation of Malava Forest, drawn from the responses of 248 survey participants. Respondents were drawn predominantly from long-standing church members (83.9% with four or more years of membership) with a secondary-education profile (67.7%), providing a stable, well-embedded vantage point from which to assess sustained church activity rather than a transient or peripheral one. Each of the 33 stewardship indicators examined is presented in turn below, with response frequencies expressed against the full sample ($n = 248$), followed by an interpretation of its implications for conservation practice and policy. Complementing the quantitative data, field observations recorded during the survey period noted operational church buildings functioning as coordination centres for conservation planning and education, and organised congregational gatherings used explicitly as platforms for environmental instruction, corroborating the pattern of institutionalised, rather than incidental, stewardship activity reflected in the tables below.

4.1 Church Participation in Conservation Activities

The starting point for assessing stewardship is whether the wider membership recognises the church's own participation in conservation work. Figure 1 presents respondent views on the church's involvement in conservation activities in and around Malava Forest.

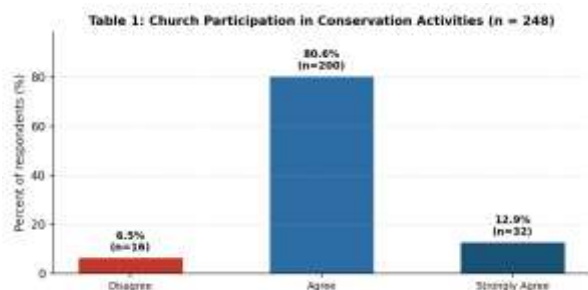


Figure 1: Church Participation in Conservation Activities (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

A combined 93.5 percent of respondents agreed that the church's participation in conservation has been beneficial, with agreement (80.6%) far outweighing strong agreement (12.9%). A small minority (6.5%) disagreed, a signal that some members are cautious about blending religious and environmental agendas or hold differing views on the appropriate scope of church involvement. The finding establishes a broad, though not unanimous, mandate for the African Church of the Holy Spirit (ACHS) to continue and expand its stewardship role, provided programmes remain voluntary rather than obligatory.

4.2 Rainwater Harvesting Initiatives

Rainwater harvesting reduces pressure on natural water sources associated with the forest and is one of the tangible technologies the church has promoted. Figure 2 shows the level of respondent support for this initiative.

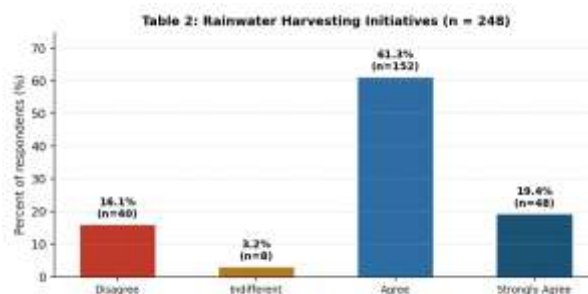


Figure 2: Rainwater Harvesting Initiatives (n = 248)
Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Rainwater harvesting attracted majority but not overwhelming support (80.7% combined agreement), alongside a notable 16.1 percent disagreement. This pattern suggests that while many households welcome

the technology, cost, technical know-how, or storage infrastructure may deter a meaningful minority. The church appears to be introducing a genuinely useful but only partially adopted intervention that would benefit from subsidised materials or artisan training to raise uptake.

4.3 Teaching and Environmental Education Activities

Teaching is central to the church's self-understanding as an environmental educator. Figure 3 documents respondent endorsement of the church's teaching role.

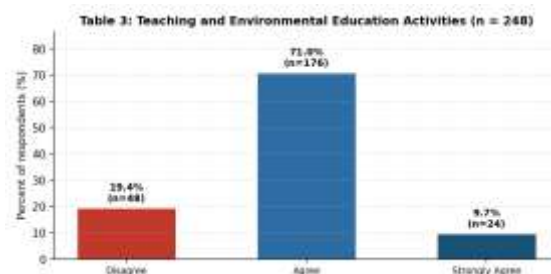


Figure 3: Teaching and Environmental Education Activities (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Teaching activities received strong majority support (80.7%), confirming that the congregation values the church's role as an educator on forest care. The 19.4 percent disagreement, larger than for most other items, may reflect uneven delivery of teaching across the eight member churches or scepticism about the depth of the content delivered. Strengthening a standard curriculum across all branches could close this gap.

4.4 Partnership Development with External Actors

Conservation is rarely achieved by a single actor; Figure 4 records community attitudes toward the church's efforts to build partnerships with government and civil-society bodies.

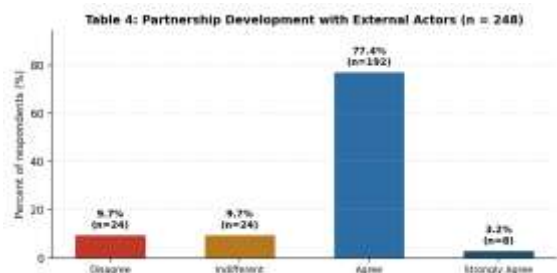


Figure 4: Partnership Development with External Actors (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Partnership-building drew 80.6 percent combined support, but a combined 19.4 percent were either indifferent or opposed. Because partnership outcomes are less visible to ordinary members than activities such as tree planting, some respondents may simply be unaware of what these relationships have produced. The finding suggests a need for the church to communicate partnership benefits more clearly to its membership.

4.5 Green Gospel Integration

The 'Green Gospel' approach fuses ecological messaging with scriptural teaching. Figure 5 presents community reception of this theological strategy.

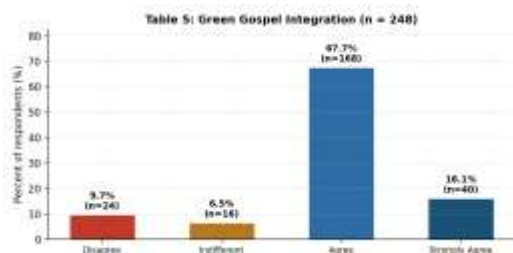


Figure 5: Green Gospel Integration (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Most respondents (83.9%) supported linking environmental messages to religious teaching, but the 9.7 percent disagreement and 6.5 percent indifference indicate a degree of theological diversity within the congregation. Some members may be uneasy about environmental themes displacing more conventional doctrinal content. Framing Green Gospel teaching as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, core worship appears advisable.

4.6 Tree Planting Initiatives

Tree planting is the most visible and widely recognised conservation activity. Figure 6 shows the more complex pattern of community response it generated.

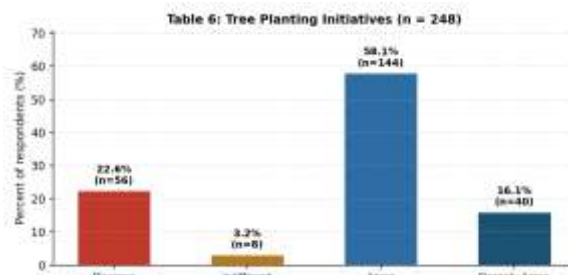


Figure 6: Tree Planting Initiatives (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Although 74.2 percent supported tree planting, the 22.6 percent disagreement is the largest recorded for any stewardship activity in this survey. This suggests underlying barriers, possibly failed past plantings, land-tenure uncertainty, or limited access to seedlings, that dampen enthusiasm despite the activity's popularity in principle. Programmes should pair planting drives with survival monitoring and clear land-use agreements to rebuild confidence.

4.7 Recognition of Forest Management Conflicts

Effective stewardship must be understood against the backdrop of tension between communities and forest authorities. Figure 7 presents the extent to which respondents recognise such conflict.

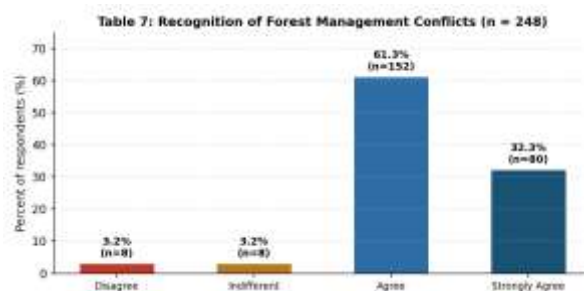


Figure 7: Recognition of Forest Management Conflicts (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

A large majority (93.6%) acknowledged that management conflicts exist, indicating that the church

operates in a contested governance environment. This context helps explain why several church-led activities, from teaching to partnership-building, are explicitly framed around building trust and reducing friction between the community and forest authorities.

4.8 Perceptions of High Fines Imposed on Violators
Enforcement penalties shape community relations with forest authorities and, indirectly, with the church that must mediate them. Figure 8 shows respondent perceptions of fine levels.

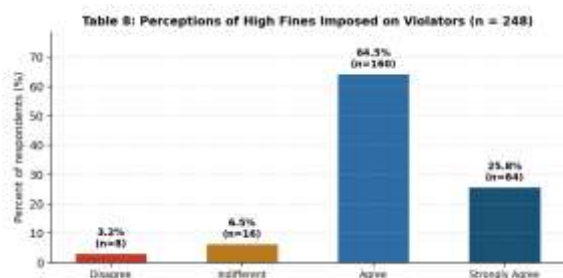


Figure 8: Perceptions of High Fines Imposed on Violators (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Ninety percent of respondents viewed the fines imposed on forest violators as excessive. Because such penalties can generate resentment that undermines cooperative conservation, the finding underscores an opportunity for the church to play a mediating, advocacy role between community members and enforcement authorities.

4.9 Lack of Community Sensitization on Fine Levels
Beyond the fines themselves, the adequacy of communication about penalty structures matters. Figure 9 documents recognition of this communication gap.

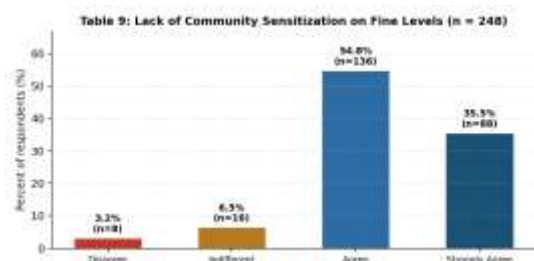


Figure 9: Lack of Community Sensitization on Fine Levels (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Ninety percent of respondents agreed that communities are insufficiently sensitised about fine levels, pointing to a concrete, actionable gap that the church, with its trusted communication channels, could help close through structured awareness sessions ahead of enforcement drives.

4.10 General Awareness Programmes

Figure 10 captures unanimous community backing for church-organised general conservation-awareness programmes.

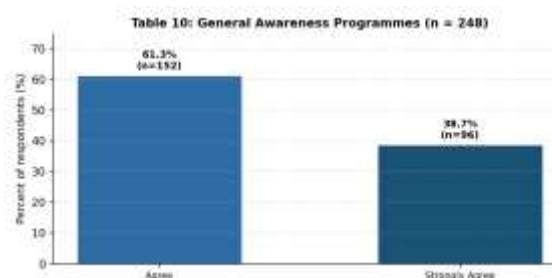


Figure 10: General Awareness Programmes (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

All 248 respondents supported general awareness programming, with well over a third expressing strong agreement. Unlike tree planting or rainwater harvesting, this activity carries no reported barriers to acceptance, making it the least contested and most readily scalable stewardship activity available to the church.

4.11 Local Decision-Making Involvement

Meaningful stewardship depends on communities having a voice in how forest resources are governed. Figure 11 presents demand for local involvement in decision-making.

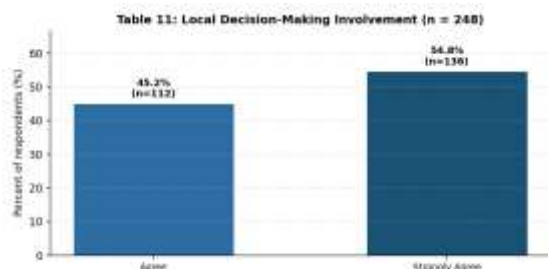


Figure 11: Local Decision-Making Involvement (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Support was unanimous, and, notably, strong agreement (54.8%) exceeded simple agreement (45.2%), indicating an intensely felt demand rather than passive acceptance. This is one of the clearest signals in the data that the church's advocacy for community inclusion in forest governance channels a genuine grassroots expectation.

4.12 Livelihood Alternatives as a Stewardship Strategy

Reducing dependence on forest extraction requires viable alternative livelihoods. Figure 12 shows community support for the church's role in promoting these alternatives.

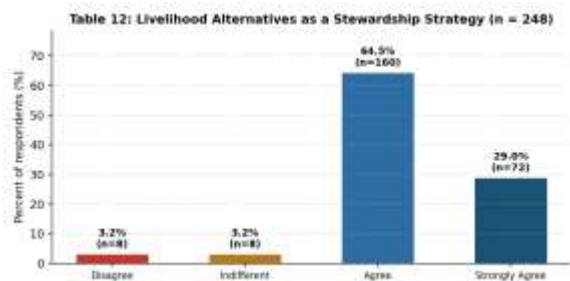


Figure 12: Livelihood Alternatives as a Stewardship Strategy (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Alternative livelihoods drew 93.5 percent combined support, confirming that respondents see economic diversification, not only preaching or planting, as central to the church's conservation mandate. The modest opposition and indifference (6.4% combined) likely reflect uncertainty about the practicality of specific alternatives rather than rejection of the principle.

4.13 Firewood Reliance as a Constraint on Stewardship

Stewardship efforts must contend with near-universal household dependence on forest firewood. Figure 13 quantifies this dependence.

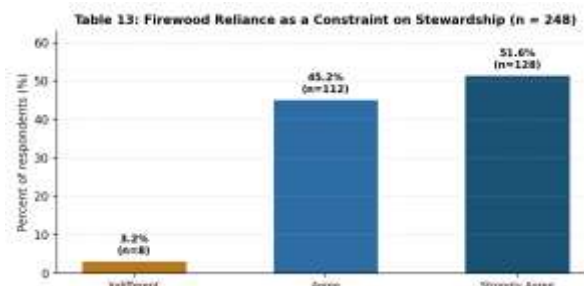


Figure 13: Firewood Reliance as a Constraint on Stewardship (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Reliance on forest firewood was affirmed by 96.8 percent of respondents, with the majority expressing strong agreement. This intensity of dependence indicates that stewardship messaging alone cannot succeed without accompanying energy alternatives, an area in which the church's tree-planting and woodlot initiatives could be deliberately linked to sustainable fuelwood production.

4.14 Traditional Medicine and Cultural Reliance on the Forest

The forest also functions as a pharmacy and cultural resource. Figure 14 shows the extent of reliance on forest-based herbal medicine.

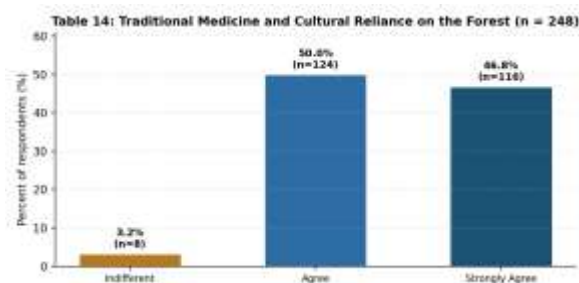


Figure 14: Traditional Medicine and Cultural Reliance on the Forest (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Nearly all respondents (96.8%) reported reliance on the forest for herbal medicine, split almost evenly

between agreement and strong agreement. This finding signals an opportunity for the church to sponsor community-managed medicinal plant gardens that simultaneously preserve cultural practice, protect wild populations of medicinal species, and align with the church's stewardship goals.

4.15 Grazing Under Forest Management Restrictions
Livestock keepers experience direct tension between forest restrictions and grazing needs. Figure 15 shows the near-universal recognition of this pressure.

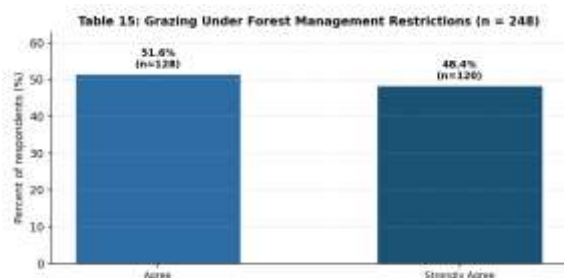


Figure 15: Grazing Under Forest Management Restrictions (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Every respondent recognised the tension between grazing needs and forest restrictions, with responses almost evenly split between agree and strongly agree. This unanimous awareness suggests that any church-supported livestock initiative, such as managed grazing zones or fodder production, would speak directly to a widely felt need.

4.16 Support for Forest Management Restriction Enforcement

Despite the tensions noted above, Figure 16 shows how respondents view the enforcement of restrictions once these are properly implemented.

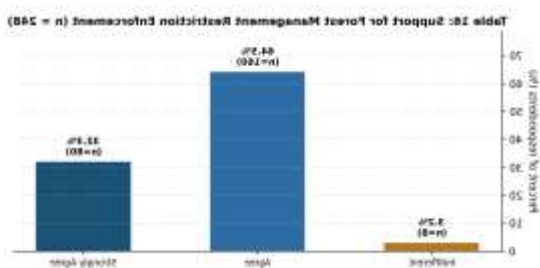


Figure 16: Support for Forest Management Restriction Enforcement (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Nearly all respondents (96.8%) supported enforcement of forest restrictions, with no recorded opposition. Read together with Figures 8 and 9, the community appears to accept the legitimacy of restrictions in principle while objecting to how fines are set and communicated, a distinction that has direct implications for how the church frames its advocacy work.

4.17 Exclusion of Church Leaders from Policy Discussions

Figure 17 documents the extent to which church leaders are perceived as excluded from forest policy forums.

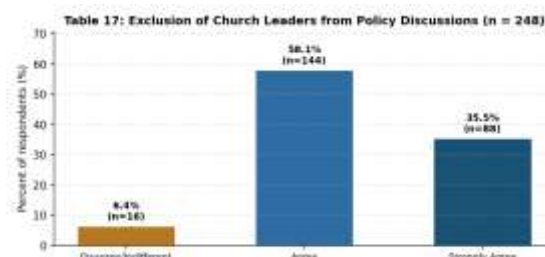


Figure 17: Exclusion of Church Leaders from Policy Discussions (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Ninety-four percent of respondents agreed that church leaders are excluded from formal forest policy discussions. This perceived marginalisation constrains the institutionalisation of faith-based perspectives within statutory forest governance and points to a clear entry point for the Kenya Forest Service to formally include ACHS representatives in Community Forest Association structures.

4.18 Faith-Based Environmental Education

Figure 18 presents community acceptance of environmental education delivered specifically through a faith lens.

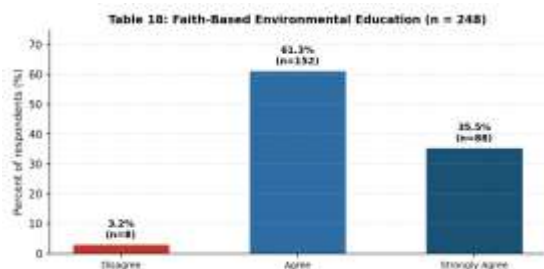


Figure 18: Faith-Based Environmental Education (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Support for faith-based environmental education reached 96.8 percent, confirming that trusted religious messengers add credibility to conservation content. The minimal 3.2 percent disagreement suggests this is among the least contentious stewardship strategies available to the church.

4.19 Community Mobilization and Awareness Support

Figure 19 captures near-unanimous endorsement of the church's mobilisation efforts around conservation awareness.

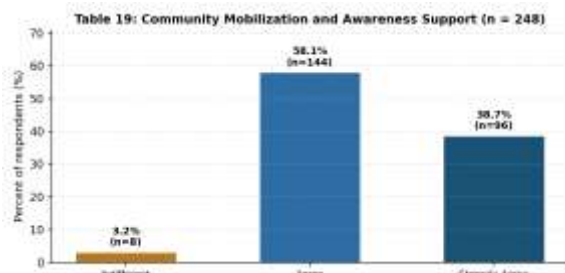


Figure 19: Community Mobilization and Awareness Support (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Ninety-seven percent of respondents supported community mobilisation activities, with no recorded disagreement. This affirms that the church's convening power, rooted in weekly gatherings and an established organisational structure, is viewed as a genuine conservation asset rather than an intrusion into secular matters.

4.20 Youth and Women Involvement

Inclusive participation strengthens the social base of conservation. Figure 20 shows support for engaging youth and women specifically.

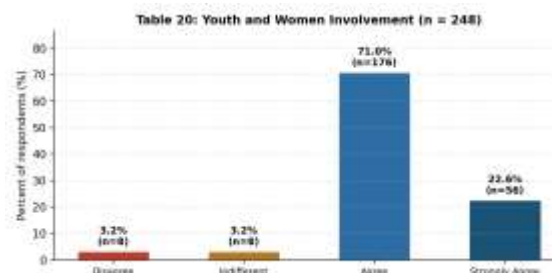


Figure 20: Youth and Women Involvement (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Combined support of 93.6 percent indicates strong recognition of the value of inclusive programming. Given that women bear much of the responsibility for firewood collection and household energy management, and that youth represent the smallest cohort currently engaged in conservation discourse, this finding directly supports the church's efforts to establish youth and women-focused conservation groups.

4.21 Partnership with Multiple Stakeholders

Figure 21 presents attitudes toward the church collaborating with a broader range of conservation stakeholders.

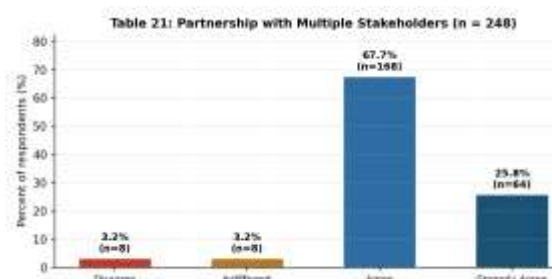


Figure 21: Partnership with Multiple Stakeholders (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Multi-stakeholder collaboration received 93.5 percent combined support, echoing the findings on partnership development (Figure 4). The consistency between these two indicators suggests that congregants view external collaboration as complementary to, rather

than competing with, the church's internal stewardship efforts.

4.22 Monitoring and Advocacy Activities

Sustained stewardship requires ongoing oversight, not only one-off interventions. Figure 22 presents unanimous support for the church's monitoring and advocacy role.

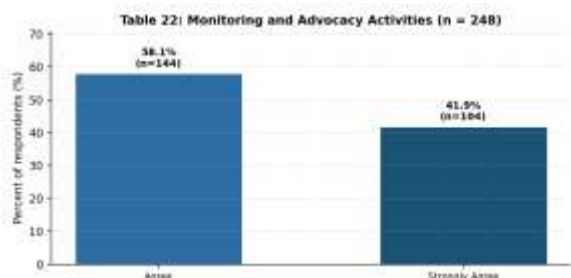


Figure 22: Monitoring and Advocacy Activities (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Complete agreement (100%) on monitoring and advocacy activities, with a high proportion of strong agreement, indicates that the congregation regards conservation as an ongoing responsibility rather than a series of discrete events. This lends legitimacy to church-based, community monitoring systems as a complement to formal Kenya Forest Service oversight.

4.23 Corruption as a Systemic Governance Issue

Figure 23 shows how respondents view corruption as a barrier that stewardship activities must contend with.

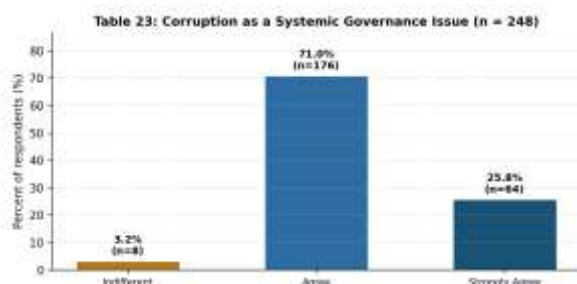


Figure 23: Corruption as a Systemic Governance Issue (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Nearly all respondents (96.8%) identified corruption as a systemic problem in forest governance. Because

corruption erodes the credibility of formal institutions, the finding strengthens the case for the church's advocacy and monitoring functions (Figure 22) as a trusted, alternative accountability channel.

4.24 Sustainable Church Land Use

The church's own landholdings offer an opportunity to model sustainable practice. Figure 24 presents community endorsement of this approach.

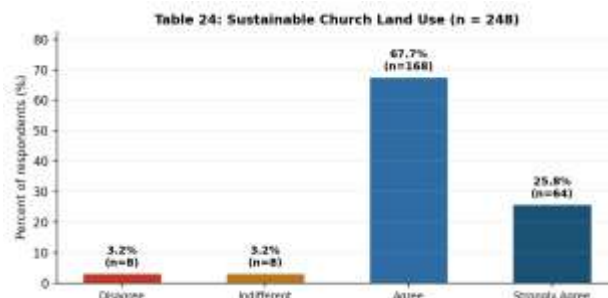


Figure 24: Sustainable Church Land Use (n = 248)
Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Support for sustainable management of church land stood at 93.5 percent, affirming that the congregation views church property as a legitimate demonstration site for practices such as tree nurseries and agroforestry that the wider community can then emulate.

4.25 Promoting Community Members into Forest Management Positions

Local representation in management structures builds legitimacy. Figure 25 shows unanimous demand for this form of inclusion.

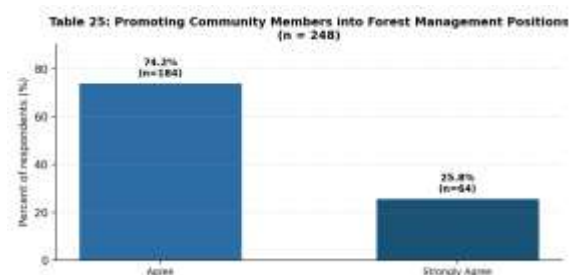


Figure 25: Promoting Community Members into Forest Management Positions (n = 248)
Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Complete agreement (100%) on promoting community members into forest management roles suggests that the church's advocacy for local representation channels a strongly and universally held community expectation, one that formal governance structures have yet to fully accommodate (see Figure 17).

4.26 Mobilizing Community Participation in Conservation Events

Figure 26 presents support for the church's role in rallying attendance at conservation events.

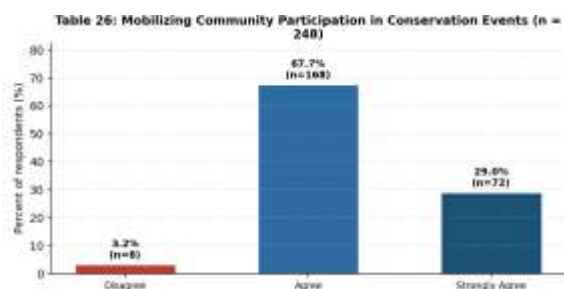


Figure 26: Mobilizing Community Participation in Conservation Events (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Ninety-seven percent of respondents supported event-based mobilisation, reinforcing the pattern established in Figures 19 and 20 that collective, church-anchored action is a well-accepted vehicle for conservation engagement in this community.

4.27 Community Benefits from Conservation Programmes

For stewardship to be sustained, communities generally expect tangible returns. Figure 27 documents support for benefit provision.

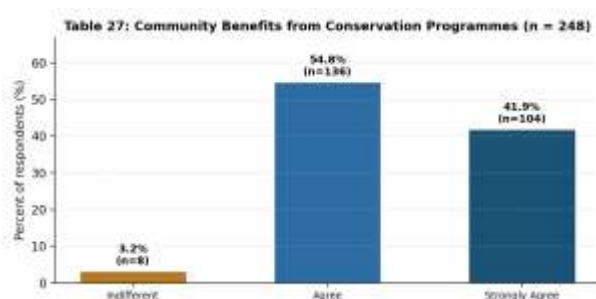


Figure 27: Community Benefits from Conservation Programmes (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Ninety-seven percent of respondents expected conservation programmes to generate tangible community benefits, with no recorded disagreement. This finding indicates that purely voluntary, benefit-free stewardship appeals are unlikely to be sustainable, and that the church's advocacy for benefit-sharing mechanisms directly reflects congregational expectation.

4.28 Use of Trusted Massenga (Local Leaders)

Figure 28 shows the strength of support for channelling stewardship messages through respected traditional or local leaders known as Massenga.

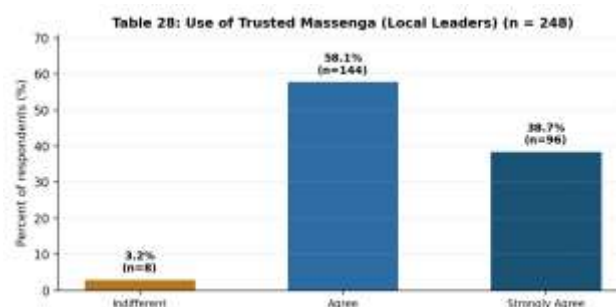


Figure 28: Use of Trusted Massenga (Local Leaders) (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Ninety-seven percent of respondents endorsed the use of trusted local leaders in conservation work, with no recorded disagreement. This confirms that customary leadership structures retain considerable influence and that church-led stewardship gains legitimacy when it works through, rather than around, such figures.

4.29 Community Engagement Expectations

Figure 29 presents respondent expectations regarding the depth and quality of their engagement in church-led conservation programming.

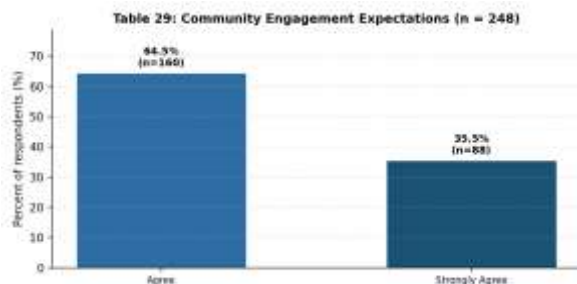


Figure 29: Community Engagement Expectations (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

All respondents expressed clear expectations for meaningful engagement. Programmes that treat community participation as symbolic rather than substantive risk falling short of these expectations, underscoring the importance of clearly articulated engagement protocols at the outset of any church-led initiative.

4.30 Conservation Benefits and Sharing Mechanisms
Figure 30 presents support specifically for transparent mechanisms to share conservation benefits.

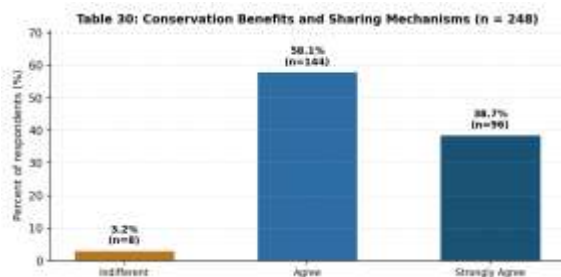


Figure 30: Conservation Benefits and Sharing Mechanisms (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Ninety-seven percent of respondents supported clear benefit-sharing mechanisms. Read alongside Figure 27, this confirms that fairness and transparency in distributing conservation gains are viewed as prerequisites, not optional add-ons, for sustained community commitment to church-led stewardship.

4.31 Transparency and Trustee Systems

Figure 31 documents demand for accountable trustee arrangements in managing conservation resources.

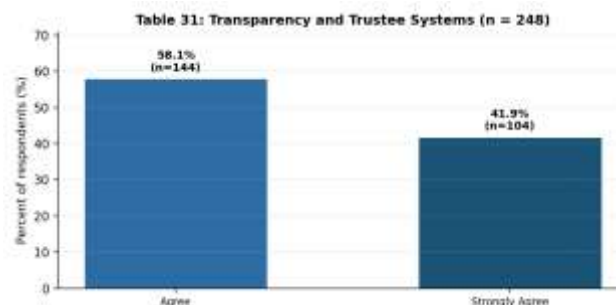


Figure 31: Transparency and Trustee Systems (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Complete agreement (100%) on the need for transparent trustee systems indicates that accountability is viewed as foundational to the legitimacy of church-led conservation finance and resource management, not a peripheral administrative concern.

4.32 Forest Policies and Management Plans

Figure 32 shows community recognition of the importance of formal policy frameworks underpinning stewardship activity.

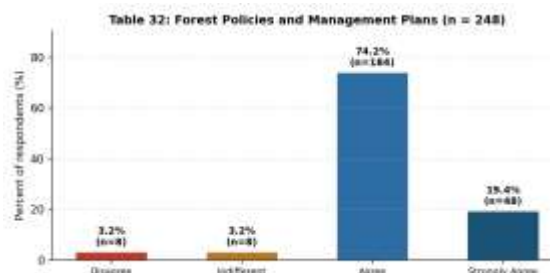


Figure 32: Forest Policies and Management Plans (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Ninety-four percent of respondents supported the existence of forest policies and management plans. The relatively higher proportion of simple, rather than strong, agreement may indicate that while the principle of formal planning is accepted, some uncertainty remains about the accessibility or relevance of specific existing plans to ordinary congregants.

4.33 Alternative Livelihood Opportunities

Figure 33, the final stewardship indicator, presents unanimous support for the church's promotion of livelihood alternatives.

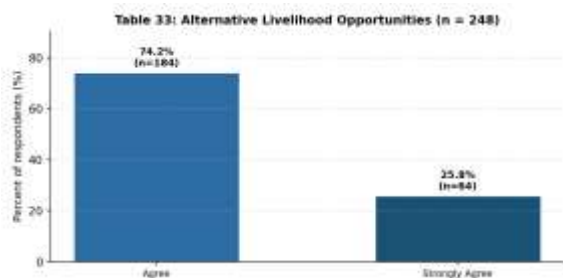


Figure 33: Alternative Livelihood Opportunities (n = 248)

Source: Field Survey Data (2025).

Complete agreement (100%) confirms that livelihood diversification is regarded as an indispensable, not secondary, dimension of the church's conservation mandate. Taken together with Figures 12 and 13, this establishes livelihood support as arguably the single most consistently endorsed stewardship priority identified in this study.

4.34 Synthesis of Findings

Taken as a whole, the 33 indicators reveal a church that has moved well beyond token environmental gestures into a coherent, multi-pronged stewardship programme spanning education (teaching, general awareness, faith-based education, seminars), direct action (tree planting, rainwater harvesting, sustainable church land use), institutional strategy (partnership development, monitoring and advocacy, promotion of community members into management, use of trusted Massenga), and advocacy on behalf of the community (sensitisation on fines, inclusion in policy discussions, benefit-sharing, anti-corruption). Support across these activities was consistently high, generally exceeding 90 percent combined agreement, with only three activities, rainwater harvesting, teaching, and tree planting, attracting disagreement above 15 percent. In each of these three cases, the pattern of dissent appears linked to implementation barriers, such as cost, uneven delivery, or past programme failures, rather than to opposition to the underlying goal. This distinction matters for programme design: it suggests that the church's stewardship agenda enjoys durable

legitimacy in principle, and that improving outcomes is primarily a matter of resourcing and consistent delivery rather than persuading a reluctant congregation. Read against the Spiritual Values of Forests Theory, the findings confirm that spiritual and cultural framing, evident in the strong support for Green Gospel preaching and faith-based education, measurably reinforces conservation engagement in this setting; read against Community-Based Conservation Theory, the near-unanimous demand for local decision-making, community representation and trusted local leadership confirms that the church's advocacy work channels an authentic, strongly-held community expectation rather than an externally imposed agenda.

V. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the forest stewardship activities that the African Church of the Holy Spirit has undertaken toward the conservation of Malava Forest. The evidence shows a church that has embedded conservation into its institutional life through teaching, direct environmental action, strategic partnerships, and advocacy for community inclusion in forest governance, activities that command broad and, on several measures, unanimous congregational support. The church operates simultaneously as an educator, a demonstration site through its own land management, a mobiliser of collective action, and an advocate that channels community concerns about fines, corruption and exclusion from policy processes toward formal authorities. Where support was less than unanimous, notably for tree planting, teaching consistency, and rainwater harvesting, the underlying constraint appears to be implementation capacity rather than a lack of community will. The African Church of the Holy Spirit therefore functions as a credible, trusted, and currently under-recognised stewardship partner in the conservation of Malava Forest.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Based on these findings, the African Church of the Holy Spirit should formalise its environmental ministry through a dedicated Conservation and

Environmental Stewardship Committee with clear mandates, and should develop a standard Green Gospel curriculum delivered consistently across all eight member congregations to close the teaching-consistency gap identified in this study. The church should expand its demonstration role by developing tree nurseries, agroforestry plots and medicinal-plant gardens on its own landholdings, and should formalise its use of trusted Massenga and youth and women's groups as structured, rather than ad hoc, participation channels. The Kenya Forest Service and county government should formally recognise the ACHS as a Community Forest Association partner, addressing the exclusion from policy discussions that nearly all respondents identified, while development partners should prioritise funding for rainwater-harvesting infrastructure and livelihood alternatives, the two implementation-constrained activities most consistently flagged in this study. Further research should undertake a comparative assessment of stewardship activity across multiple denominations within the Kakamega Forest ecosystem to determine whether the patterns identified here are specific to the ACHS or generalisable to faith-based conservation more broadly, and a longitudinal study tracking forest-cover and livelihood outcomes over five to ten years would help establish whether these stewardship activities translate into measurable ecological gains over time.

VII. DISCLOSURE ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

This manuscript was prepared with the assistance of an artificial intelligence (AI) language tool, which was used to help reorganize it. All underlying data, survey results, and thematic findings originate from the author's own primary research and thesis; the AI tool did not generate, alter, or fabricate any empirical results. The author reviewed, verified and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation and originality of the content presented in this paper. AI assistance was used solely as a drafting and organisational aid, consistent with principles of transparency and academic integrity, and does not constitute authorship. Readers and reviewers are encouraged to treat the empirical claims in this paper as attributable to the author's original fieldwork, with

AI involvement limited to editorial and structural support in preparing the manuscript for submission.

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