Unveiling Shadows: Tracking Youth Disengagement from the Church

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Abstract

This study examines the waning attendance in youth ministry within rural and township areas of South Africa's "mainline churches" and its potential implications for youth development. Amidst prevailing challenges like substance abuse, adolescent pregnancy, and mental health concerns, the church, often a crucial source of guidance, has the potential to offer significant support. However, changing cultural dynamics, modernization, socio-economic influences, the challenges posed by urbanization, and the intersecting issues of LGBTQ inclusivity, disability considerations, and evolving identity dynamics, along with alternative entertainment, have collectively contributed to youth disengagement from conventional religious practices. This decline raises substantial concerns regarding its impact on the youth's moral and spiritual well-being. Through a comprehensive literature review, this research aims to understand the underlying causes of this decline and propose strategies for revitalising the youth ministry. By metaphorically "illuminating the hidden obstacles," this study seeks to empower the church to foster spiritual growth, influence South Africa's youth positively, and address pressing challenges effectively.

Keywords: Youth Ministry, Disengagement, South Africa, Church Attendance, Revitalisation strategies

Introduction

In recent years, a significant decrease in youth ministry attendance has emerged as a worldwide issue, with particular emphasis on its impact in Africa, notably affecting the rural and township areas of South Africa.[1] This trend prompts questions about its implications for the development of young people facing an array of challenges, including drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, suicide, depression, and mental health issues.[2] Compounding these challenges is

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[1] Timothy Mullen, "Young People and the Baptist Church: Staying and Leaving," *The Grants Register*, Edith Cowan University, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-96053-8_427. ; Charles Sumpter, "Declining Church Attendance: 5 Reasons Millennials Stopped Attending Church," PhD Thesis, Liberty University School of divinity, 2019. Mpumelelo Ntetha, "A Practical Theological Reflection of the Youth Ministry in Khayelitsha," PhD Thesis, University of South Africa, 2019.

[2] Serge Bataliack et al., "Suicide in Africa, a Neglected Reality" (World Health Organisation, 2022); Nomusa F. Mngoma and Oyedeji A. Ayonrinde, "Mental Distress and Substance Use among

the staggering unemployment rate of 46.5% among South African youth.[3] This unemployment is argued to be linked to mental health issues.[4]

Of greater concern is the high suicide rate among young people in Africa. Amidst these challenges, the church is often seen as a source of guidance and support, offering potential solutions within the communities it serves.[5] These solutions encompass both spiritual and social dimensions, employing biblical strategies for human service and social transformation.[6] However, the disengagement of young people from the church raises doubts about whether its teachings can effectively reach those who need them the most.

This departure becomes even more concerning when we consider that many young individuals, who once participated in children's ministry, may spend most of their young adult life outside the church.[7] This realization underscores the urgency for effective youth ministry strategies to retain them within the church community. Various studies have explored youth ministry challenges broadly, with specific settings being underrepresented. Shantelle Webber examined the decolonization of theology and the importance of contextualised approaches, using Scripture Union as a mission-based youth ministry model.[8] In Nairobi, Mwangi addressed issues such as low youth attendance, financial constraints, and leadership gaps, proposing responsive strategies.[9] Additionally, Weber highlighted the value of comparative analysis, emphasising cultural contextualisation in African research, using a faith formation case study in South Africa.[10] Garth Aziz delved into the transformation of youth ministry within practical theology, advocating for a shift from traditional ecclesial models to engaging with public theology, stressing contextual considerations for global relevance.[11] This research fills a literature gap by focusing on challenges faced by young

Rural Black South African Youth Who Are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 69, no. 3 (2023): 532–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/00207640221114252.

[3] Statistics South Africa, "Quartely Labour Force Survey QLFS Q1 2023," *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS)* (Pretoria, 2023), https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/Media release QLFS Q1 2023.

[4] Mngoma and Ayonrinde, "Mental Distress and Substance Use among Rural Black South African Youth Who Are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 69, no. 3 (2023): 532 –542, doi: 10.1177/00207640221114252

[5] Ishimilenga Pablo-George Emedi, "The Local church as an agent of social transformation in a poor community: A Practical and Methodical Approach" (Master's Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2010).

[6] Emedi, "The local church as an agent of social transformation".

[7] Mullen, "Young People and the Baptist Church: Staying and Leaving"; Pamela Caudill Ovwigho and Arnie Cole, "Keeping Faith in the Transition to Young Adulthood" (The Good News Broadcasting Association, 2011).

[8] Shantelle Weber, "Decolonising Youth Ministry Models? Challenges and Opportunities in Africa Brief History of Scripture Union in Africa," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2017): 1–10, https://doi.org/ 10.4102/hts.v73i4.4796.

[9] Charles Maina Mwangi, "Challenges of Ministering To the Youth : A Case Study of Presbyterian Church of East Africa Langata Parish, Nairobi County" (Master's Thesis, University of Nairobi, 2015).

[10] Shantelle Weber, "A (South) African Voice on Youth Ministry Research : Powerful or Powerless ?" *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2015): 2–7, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i2.2973.

[11] Garth Aziz, "Youth Ministry as a Public Practical Theology: A South African Evangelical Perspective," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2022): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7498.

individuals in South African townships and rural areas within mainline churches, attributing the decline in youth attendance to cultural shifts, modernization, urbanization, and technological changes, causing a disassociation from conventional religious practices.[12] It can be argued that urbanisation and technology reshape societal norms, potentially making traditional churches seem outdated for the younger generation.[13] These factors cause a disassociation from conventional religious practices, making traditional churches appear outdated to the younger generation.

Furthermore, socio-economic hardships, particularly pronounced in rural and township areas, hinder traditional churches from connecting effectively with young members due to limited resources and educational opportunities.[14] The allure of alternative entertainment and social interactions further diverts youth attention from church activities, echoing global sentiments expressed through events like the Arab Spring and subsequent protests.[15]

The research objectives are twofold: first, to discern the pivotal factors contributing to the disengagement of young individuals, and second, to formulate effective strategies to reinvigorate youth ministry within these church communities. The study addresses the following research questions: What are the primary catalysts contributing to the decline in active participation among young people in the context of rural and township areas in South Africa, with a specific emphasis on mainline churches? What innovative strategies can be proposed to breathe new life into the youth ministry within these church settings, fostering meaningful engagement and spiritual growth among the youth?

Driven by a compelling need to address challenges facing young individuals and unlock the transformative potential of the church, this study emphasises the importance of prioritizing the spiritual and personal development of youth. By acknowledging the joy in heaven when a soul is saved, churches are urged to prioritise aiding the youth's spiritual and personal development.[16] Inspired by biblical principles, notably Proverbs 22:6, widely acknowledged as a cornerstone in Christian parenting and foundational to a critical exploration within the realm of youth ministry and engagement, the study aligns with the

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[12] Mullen, "Young People and the Baptist Church: Staying and Leaving,"; Weber, "Decolonising Youth Ministry Models? Challenges and Opportunities in Africa Brief History of Scripture Union in Africa," 1-10.

[13] Jacques W. Beukes and Marichen Van der Westhuizen, "Exploring the Voices of Children and Youth: A Plea for Renewal in Church Structures for Child and Youth Ministries," *STJ | Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 2, no. 2 (2016): 111–30. https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2016.v2n2.a06 ; Liliian Whyken, Alfred Modise, and Sepeng Percy, "Social Issues on the Academic Performance of Secondary School Learners in the Limpopo Province," *International E-Journal of Educational Studies* 6, No. 12 (2022): 174–183, doi: 10.31458/iejes.1143369.

[14] Tanya Pretorius and Linda Theron, "'A Pillar of Strength': Empowering Women and the Resilience of Township-Dwelling Adolescents," *Young*, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308818795081.

[15] OECD, "Beyond Smiling Faces: How Engaging with Youth Can Help Transform Societies and Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals," *ActionAid International & OECD Development Communication Network* (ActionAid International & OECD Development Communication Network, 2015).

[16] Lyn Kidson, "The Anxious Search for the Lost Coin (Luke 15 : 8 – 10): Lost Coins ,Women's Dowries, and the Contribution of Numismatics and Phenomenology to Gospel Research Research," *Australian Biblical Review* 68 (2021): 76-88.

metaphor of youth as salt and light, emphasising their potential to influence and illuminate.[17] Grounded in these principles, the study explores the role of the local church and its potential positive impact on the lives of young individuals amid challenges such as drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and mental health issues, all while delving into the decline in youth ministry attendance.

Methodology

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to understand the reasons behind the declining youth attendance in church and its potential effects on youth development in South Africa. Significantly, literature reviews can be used in conceptual or empirical studies, or in standalone investigations, with the latter subject to diverse curation approaches.[18] As Hiebl notes, systematic review methodologies are poised to emerge as the prevailing standard in assessing the management research literature.[19] This review examined the existing academic studies, articles, and reports discussing youth engagement trends in traditional churches, especially in rural and township areas. It also explored the impact of religious involvement on the development and well-being of young people, as well as potential strategies to revitalise the youth ministry and engagement.

Literature Review

Amidst a shifting Christian church landscape, engaging youth in rural and township churches faces increasing complexity. Studies reveal evolving youth ministry, the need for adaptation, and the challenge of retention, spanning generational shifts, cultural dynamics, leadership traits, and contextual theology. This literature review explores insights to innovate youth ministry, particularly in South Africa's rural and township settings, amidst these intricate factors.

Impact on Youth Development: Challenges and Opportunities

Examining the historical influence of the Christian church in Africa, studies address the challenges and uncertainties confronting the young Church. Tagheu delves into ecclesiological, pastoral, political, economic, and social aspects, advocating for African youth's pivotal role in shaping Christianity's present and future.[20] Nel, in revising a book on Youth Ministry, emphasizes a missional approach, balancing academic depth, and inclusivity for Practical Theologians.[21] Selvam explores Christian Youth Ministry as a faith-journey, drawing

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[17] Michael Oyebowale Oyetade, "Salt and Light in Matthew 5:13-14: A Paradigm for Democratic Sustainability in Nigeria," *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 23, no. 1 (2021): 6.

[18] Weng Marc Lim, Satish Kumar, and Faizan Ali, "Advancing Knowledge through Literature Reviews: 'What', 'Why', and 'How to Contribute,'" *Service Industries Journal* 42, no. 7–8 (2022): 481–513, https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2022.2047941.

[19] Martin R.W. Hiebl, "Sample Selection in Systematic Literature Reviews of Management Research," *Organizational Research Methods* 26, no. 2 (2023): 229–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428120986851.

[20] Jean Paul Tagheu, "The Church of the Youth and the Youth of the Church: A Plea For the Present and Future of Christianity," *The Cathatolic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life* 4, no. 2 (2019): 43–58.

[21] Malan Nel, *Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach* (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2018). https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2018.bk83.

parallels with the disciples on the road to Emmaus.[22] He underscores contemporary challenges in defining youth, stressing the need for descriptive definitions and considerations for effective ministry. Amarkwei proposes the "Divine Evolutionary Education Theory," aligning with the African worldview, aiming to guide Christian youth education.[23] Together, these studies underscore the growing awareness of challenges and the pressing need for adaptive evolution within churches.

The impact of declining numbers is particularly notable in mainline churches, which have held a historically significant position among Protestant denominations.[24] Majola focuses on this trend, highlighting both the decline of mainline churches and the growth of Pentecostalism in Africa, focusing specifically on South Africa.[25] Ferreira and Chipenyu further elucidate the global nature of this phenomenon.[26] These insights emphasise the urgency for mainline churches to comprehend the underlying causes, enabling them to address challenges proactively and continue to play a meaningful societal role. A parallel challenge is the departure of youth from traditional churches, a phenomenon that transcends geographical boundaries. Sung and Korea's exploration of evangelical churches and missionary organisations reveals the departure of young individuals from religious institutions.[27] The foregoing trend is echoed in the struggles faced by the church in Wales, arguably demonstrating its global reach.[28] Mullen's study on the Baptist Church youth delves into the intricate interplay of culture, spirituality, attendance, and personal choices.[29] These collective studies underscore mainline churches' complexity in retaining youth engagement, while illuminating the diverse factors influencing these decisions.

Mainline churches have historically played a crucial role in communities, offering guidance, support, and a sense of belonging. Selvam underscores this significance within the African Catholic youth ministry, advocating for a more proactive missionary approach that addresses the youth's challenges and connects with their everyday lives.[30] Aziz discusses practical theology, and proposes a departure from the traditional 'reach and teach' approach

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[22] Sahaya Selvam, "Walking with the Young: A Theology of Youth Ministry in Africa," in *Church Ministry in African Christianity*, ed. Ronilick E K Mchami and Benjamin Simon (Nairobi, Kenya: Action Publishers, 2006), 65–80.

[23] Charles Amarkwei, "Divine Evolutionary Education Theory: A Proposal for Youth Ministry in Africa," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): 1–13. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32051/06241901.

[24] Jeremy Kimble Pridgeon, "A Comparison of the Religious Activity of Mainline and Non-Mainline Institutions of Higher Education in the South Eastern United States," *Angewandte Chemie International Edition* (PhD thesis, University of Alabama, 2010).

[25] Yanga LP Majola, "The Naming of Independent Churches in the 21st Century: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Charismatic Churches in South Africa," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 48, no. 1 (2022): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/11042.

[26] Ignatius W. Ferreira and Wilbert Chipenyu, "Church Decline: A Comparative Investigation Assessing More than Numbers," *In Die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 55, no. 1 (2021): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2645.

[27] Inkyung Sung and In Korea, "Why Are Young People Leaving Churches ? Form of Belief," *L'abri Fellowship Korea* (L'abri Fellowship Korea, Kangwondo Korea), 2009. https://www.labri.kr/newsletters/archive/202112

[28] Mark Griffiths, "The Missing Generations: The Church in Wales and Young People," *Missiology: An International Review* 49, no. 1 (2021): 79–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829620937395.

[29] Mullen, "Young People and the Baptist Church: Staying and Leaving."

[30] Selvam, "Walking with the Young: A Theology of Youth Ministry in Africa," 65-80.

in the youth ministry.[31] Instead, he advocates for integrating public theology and engaging young people as public theologians who view their faith and spirituality within the broader societal context. This shift reflects a changing landscape where individual salvation is juxtaposed with the community's needs, which is particularly relevant for the majority and developing world. These studies underscore the evolving nature of the youth ministry and the necessity for innovative frameworks that resonate with the contemporary youth demographics.

Significant historical events and societal changes have shaped the relationship between the youth and the church. Froise's exploration of mission churches in Swaziland spanning 150 years reveals three distinct eras.[32] The arrival of missionaries marked the initial phase, followed by a decline in the church growth since 1968, as individuals with weaker ties to Christianity sought alternative affiliations. The third era reflects the impact of rapid modernisation, reshaping societal norms. Baby boomers, shaped by high parental religious involvement in childhood and evolving into religious "seekers" amid 1950s and 1960s societal changes, demonstrate improved psychological well-being during the transition to adulthood, especially among strongly religious individuals with liberal and private orientations, suggesting the enduring influence of early religiosity on adult life course outcomes.[33] On the other end of the scale is Generation Z's (born 1997-2012) prominence as consumers.[34]

The demographic shifts, pose a central challenge in youth ministry as the coexistence of millennials (ages 25-40) and Generation Z within the church reflects an evolving landscape at the intersection of youth and faith.

Defining and engaging the youth within the church is pivotal. Selvam highlights the nuanced challenge of ministering to youths within this distinct phase between childhood and full adulthood.[35] Evolving perceptions from "teenagers" to the "youth" bring unique challenges for church youth ministries. Selvam suggests viewing youthhood as the transitioning from puberty to life establishment, reflecting its complexity. Global definitions of youth differ (UN 15-24, Commonwealth 15-29, Tanzania 15-24/35), including South Africa (15-35), compounding the task.[36] Amidst these dynamics, embracing holistic and inclusive youth engagement is essential for active participation and meaningful contributions in church communities.

Adapting the ministry for generational engagement is crucial. Sumpter contrasts millennials with baby boomers, highlighting millennials' emphasis on belonging over the

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[31] Aziz, "Youth Ministry as a Public Practical Theology: A South African Evangelical Perspective", 1-7.

[32] Marjorie Froise, "150 Years of Mission-Churches in Swaziland, 1844 -1994 Elitism: A Factor in the Growth and Decline" (Master's Thesis, University of South Africa, 1996), https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/43176026.

[33] Woosang Hwang et al., "Religiosity of Baby-Boomers in Young Adulthood: Associations with Psychological Well-Being over the Life Course," *Advances in Life Course Research* 52 (June 2022): 100477, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2022.100477.

[34] Marianna Šramková and Mária Sirotiaková, "Consumer Behaviour of Generation Z in the Context of Dual Quality of Daily Consumption Products on EU Market," *SHS Web of Conferences* 92 (2021): 06038, https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20219206038.

[35] Selvam, "Walking with the Young: A Theology of Youth Ministry in Africa," 65-80.

[36] Lauren Kim Barnes, "Challenges South African Youth Face in Education and Their Quest to Eradicate Issues of the Past," *Alternate Horizons*, no. 1 (2021): 1–5, https://doi.org/10.35293/ah.vi.3540.

belief element.[37] Churches should shift from being belief-centric to guiding life choices for relevance.[38] Since the late 1960s, the modern youth ministry has aligned with the youth culture and independence (Seventh-day Adventist Youth Ministries, 2010). Ovwigho and Cole find that high school engagement drops by 70% in young adulthood.[39] Addressing generational worship perspectives is critical for youth engagement.[40] The church must adapt and must guide millennials and foster inclusivity for relevance and retention.

McCormick stresses investing in understanding to bridge generational differences, which is critical for congregations striving to engage diverse age groups.[41] Church perspectives vary across generations, which pose complex and unique challenges. To address these challenges, churches must create inclusive spaces or platforms for cross-generational interaction. Despite differing values, the study underscores the knowledge exchange potential, with older members mentoring the youth, while being inspired by them. Russell cautions the youth focus while valuing the boomers' role.[42] Randolph views boomers as vital connectors linking the generations because boomers influence and adapt to change, they remain pivotal even though the millennials dominate the USA demographic.[43] Church vitality hinges on inclusive intergenerational environments and leads to unique insights from each generation.

Numerous studies explore youth engagement in South Africa, focusing on the Khayelitsha Township. Ntetha highlights the church's potential to support the youth through their challenges.[44] Aziz addresses positive development in Cape Flats, tackling issues like unemployment and violence.[45] Furthermore, Aziz redefines youth's leadership potential across ages.[46] These studies underline religious institutions' role in fostering positive youth development, especially churches. This chapter combines research, expert opinions, and the historical context to reveal the intricate link between traditional churches and youth engagement, presenting challenges and opportunities amid diverse environments.

Factors contributing to the decline

In tracing the youth's paths, their 'shadows' reveal diverse factors contributing to the disengagement and attendance decline. Psychological uncertainty and religious ambiguity, including peer pressure, isolation, and loneliness, lead to detachment from religious

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[37] Sumpter, "Declining Church Attendance: 5 Reasons Millennials Stopped Attending Church."

[38] South Pacific division, "A Brief History of Youth Ministry in the South Pacific: Personal and Spiritual Growth" (Seventh-day Adventist Youth Ministries, 2010).

[39] Ovwigho and Cole, "Keeping Faith in the Transition to Young Adulthood."

[40] Ovwigho and Cole, "Keeping Faith in the Transition to Young Adulthood."

[41] Marilyn Irene Mccormick, "Understanding Generational Differences and Connecting Generations at Grace Memorial Baptist Church" (PhD Thesis, Acadia University, 2016).

[42] Paul D Russell, "Engaging and Mobilizing Baby Boomers for Effective Ministry" (PhD Thesis, South Eastern University, 2022).

[43] William Randolph, "Baby Boomers : The Church 's Linchpin Generation" (The Sage, 2016).

[44] Ntetha, "A Practical Theological Reflection of the Youth Ministry in Khayelitsha."

[45] Aziz, "Youth Ministry as a Public Practical Theology: A South African Evangelical Perspective 1-6.

[46] Garth Aziz, "Age Does Not Determine Influence: A Consideration for Children in Ministerial Service," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5848.

involvement. Ovwigho and Cole highlight familial and peer pressures, non-believing partners, and adult role models with wavering faith as drivers of the declining attendance, with boredom surprisingly being a smaller factor.[47] Sung and Korea expose frustrating distorted spirituality and anti-intellectual trends in Europe and America, widening the gap between personal experiences over facts.[48] Even in South Africa, there are questions that arise as a result of personal experiences and subjective beliefs take precedence over factual information and intellectual inquiry.[49] Cultural, social, and historical factors can contribute to the emergence of anti-intellectualism and a preference for subjective spirituality.[50]

These challenges showcase the youth's struggle in the evolving religious landscape. In addition, authors emphasise the church's difficulty in conveying Christian principles amidst postmodern influences and evangelical shifts, causing disillusionment. This alienates the youth with regard to traditional institutions and motivates them to engage in authentic exploration, driving disengagement and a quest for spiritually relevant experiences.

In addition to the above, it can be inferred that there are concerns about the conduciveness of the environment within the church. Barry and Lorraine emphasise the need for promoting youth engagement within the Seventh day Adventist Church, and set the various factors out that lead to their departure.[51] These factors, such as the excessive focus on non-essential matters, insincerity in adults' lives, organisational prioritisation over people's needs, unfulfilling worship experiences, and fear of hypocrisy, contribute to a disengaging atmosphere. The perceived monotony, ideological disagreements, encounters with hypocritical individuals, and uninspiring church activities further contribute to the disengagement of school leavers, as highlighted in Gurney's research.[52] Therefore, fostering an environment that addresses these issues and aligns with the needs and expectations of the youth is crucial to enhancing their engagement and involvement within the church.

Significant concerns revolve around the leadership of the youth within the ministry. Ntetha delved into the essential attributes expected from a youth ministry leader and discovered several noteworthy insights.[53] One of the primary concerns identified was the need for adequately trained youth ministry leaders, as individuals were often elected without proper training or development. The research stressed the significance of youth leaders embodying and capturing the vision of the youth ministry in their specific contexts. Additionally, it emphasised the need for youth leaders to undergo training in socio-economic aspects and the youth culture, allowing them to understand better and connect with the young generation. Another essential aspect highlighted was the importance of young people understanding that the ministry primarily revolves around serving God rather than merely focusing on social projects. The study provides valuable guidance on cultivating an effective

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[47] Ovwigho and Cole, "Keeping Faith in the Transition to Young Adulthood."

[48] Sung and Korea, "Why Are Young People Leaving Churches ? Form of Belief."

[49] Stephen Victor Coertze, "Challenges Facing the African Church: South African Theologians Speak Out," (Master's Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2005).

[50] Coertze, "Challenges Facing the African Church: South African Theologians Speak Out."

[51] N. C. Barry and M. G. Lorraine, "Youth Participation and Community Change: An Introduction," *Journal of Community Practice* 14, no. 1–2 (2006): 107–23. https://doi.org/10.1300/J125v14n01.

[52] Nadine Gurney, "Why School Leavers Abandon Church" (Master's Thesis, South African Theological Seminary, 2007).

[53] Ntetha, "A Practical Theological Reflection of the Youth Misnitry in Khayelitsha."

and impactful youth ministry leadership within the church by addressing these key characteristics and training needs.

Cultural shifts, modernisation, and urbanisation impact youth engagement in religious contexts significantly. Urbanisation frequently entails a rapid lifestyle and heightened exposure to diverse influences, including job scarcity, cultural shock, limited community care, and the accelerated urban pace that results in social stratification, thereby diminishing the emphasis on conventional religious practices.[54] Moreover, in the urban setting, the lack of parental involvement arising from work commitments, instances of single motherhood, and a scarcity of available mentors compel youth to seek guidance from the media, underscoring the imperative for the church to assume a pivotal role in mentoring and supporting young individuals within their local communities.[55] Cultural shifts, especially among the youth, may result in a reinterpretation of religious values or a disconnection from established church norms.[56] In this regard, Weber explores the postmodern youth's paradoxical spirituality, where pluralism coexists with a yearning for a divine connection.[57] South African cultural diversity directs attention to traditional practices blending youth development, faith, and identity. In turn, Chase analyses youth disengagement factors, including intellectual disconnection, perceived church hostility, alternative viewpoints, and concerns about manipulation comprehensively.[58] These insights reveal the intricate interplay of spirituality, culture, and identity, shaping the youth engagement within religious spheres. Sumpter highlights that millennial with a non-dimensional focus on God and the church, prioritise relationships and belonging over entertainment, often exploring different congregations.[59] As noted earlier, their approach underscores the need for inclusive and relational environments. Adaptation to millennials' unique preferences is vital for fostering a meaningful connection and addressing shifting dynamics in religious institutions.

Issues surrounding the decolonisation and contextualisation of theological perspectives in South Africa are of paramount concern. Weber underscores the call to decolonise African theology while challenging the distinction between "decolonising" and "contextualising," advocating for theology to be deeply rooted in the African context.[60] This stance necessitates that the African youth ministry models should be tied to the region's unique contextual circumstances and interpretations of biblical texts. This approach recognises the importance of adapting theological perspectives to align with Africa's distinct cultural and social

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[54] Mwangi, "Challenges of Ministering to the Youth: A Case Study of Presbyterian Church of East Africa Langata Parish, Nairobi County."

[55] Mwangi, "Challenges of Ministering to the Youth: A Case Study of Presbyterian Church of East Africa Langata Parish, Nairobi County."

[56] Aerika S. Brittian, Nina Lewin, and Shane A. Norris, "'You Must Know Where You Come From': South African Youths' Perceptions of Religion in Time of Social Change," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 28, no. 6 (2013): 642–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413480834.

[57] Shantelle Weber, "Faith, Culture and Youth Ministry in South Africa. The Impact of Traditional Cultural Practices on the Faith Formation of Youth," *Missionalia* 49, no. 2016 (2021): 133–51.

[58] Jessica Chase, "Why They Stop Attending Church: An Exploratory Study Of Religious Participation Decline Among Millennials From Conservative Christian Backgrounds," (Master's Thesis, University of Central Florida, 2013), http://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/2615.

[59] Sumpter, "Declining Church Attendance: 5 Reasons Millennials Stopped Attending Church."

[60] Weber, "Decolonising Youth Ministry Models? Challenges and Opportunities in Africa Brief History of Scripture Union in Africa, 1-10.

dynamics, fostering a more pertinent, intricate, and resonant connection between theology and its practitioners.

In the same vein, Brittian et al. highlight the crucial role of understanding one's roots by the South African youth, especially during societal transformation.[61] Their study in the Jozi-Soweto metropolitan area unveils religion's multi-faceted functions for the youth: a support system, a bridge to historical heritage, a moral compass, a catalyst for holistic growth, and a fusion of African traditional practices with Christian beliefs. Hence, the imperative to re-evaluate the interplay of decolonisation and contextualisation within the South African theological perspectives, underscores the need to harmonise theology with the intricate fabric of the African culture and societal dynamics. This comprehensive approach enriches the theological discourse and strengthens youth ministry models to resonate profoundly within the unique African context.

The youth ministry faces inclusivity and ethical challenges through issues such as LGTBQ and disability. Jones et al. highlight the harm caused by conversion practices targeting LGBTQA+ individuals, leading to religious trauma and moral injury.[62] These practices attempt to change sexual orientation and gender identity, resulting in abuse and mental health issues.[63] Thus, churches that are less accommodating or affirming of diverse identities may alienate LGBTQ youth. Inaccessibility for disabled individuals in African churches is another cause for concern which has led Amenyedzi to stress the need for youth ministries to include disabled individuals actively.[64] Concern here stems from insufficient support for individuals with disabilities can create barriers to their active participation.[65] Noted is that addressing these issues requires improved pastoral care.

Youth disengagement in churches also results from evolving societal and maturity influences. Selvam notes the earlier puberty due to improved health, which alters traditional life paths.[66] The contemporary youth face transient lives with frequent travel, job changes, and media dominance, which reshapes their upbringing. Teenage pregnancy, family dynamics, and non-natural deaths worsen the challenges experienced by the youth.[67] In the process, they navigate sexual messages, technology, and spirituality intersections.[68] Guiding them through these complexities is crucial for holistic growth. The church in South Africa can play a role by

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[61] Brittian, Lewin, and Norris, "'You Must Know Where You Come From': South African Youths' Perceptions of Religion in Time of Social Change," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 28, no. 6 (2013): 642–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413480834

[62] Timothy W. Jones, Jennifer Power, and Tiffany M. Jones, "Religious Trauma and Moral Injury from LGBTQA+ Conversion Practices," *Social Science and Medicine* 305 (2022): 35609469, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.115040.

[63] Jones, Power, and Jones, "Religious Trauma and Moral Injury from LGBTQA+ Conversion Practices."

[64] Seyram Amenyedzi, "'We Are Forgotten': The Plight of Persons With Disability in Youth Ministry," *Scriptura* 120, no. 1 (2021): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.7833/120-1-1459.

[65] Amenyedzi, "We Are Forgotten': The Plight of Persons with Disability in Youth Ministry," *Scriptura* 120, no. 1 (2021): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.7833/120-1-1459.

[66] Selvam, "Walking with the Young: A Theology of Youth Ministry in Africa," 65-80.

[67] Jonas Molefetsane Khauoe, "Challenges Faced by Teenagers in the 21st Century with Reference to Three Local Churches in Gauteng" (Master's Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2004).

[68] Kevin Daniel Monahan, "Influence of Technology on Adolescent Development and Spiritual Formation" (PhD Thesis, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009).

addressing isolation, marginalisation, and early transitions, fostering unity and empowerment.

In South Africa, the township and rural youth confront socio-economic challenges like inequality, crime, and substance abuse.[69] In addition, unemployment, poverty, and violence hamper church engagement.[70] Disproportionate non-natural deaths affect their well-being and emotional connection to the church.[71] These issues pose the risk of severe outcomes, including youth suicide linked to unemployment.[72] In addressing post-apartheid divisions, churches are vital in promoting social cohesion and inclusivity for the marginalised youth.[73]

In summary, the youth in South African townships and rural areas contend with various societal challenges encompassing their health, education, family dynamics, and technology, collectively shaping their experiences and influencing their engagement in church activities. The myriad societal challenges the youth face in South African townships and rural areas underscore the need for churches to create a tailored and nurturing environment that fosters engagement, encompassing diverse generations associated with the youth ministry.

Consequences of Youth Disengagement from the Church

Should the factors casting shadows on youth disengagement from the church persist unaddressed, they are poised to yield profound consequences that will reverberate in the lives of the youth and in the broader society. Mashau adds that there is a prevailing negative perception of marriage within the church context as well as an increase in cohabitation and premarital sexual activity among young Christians in contemporary South Africa.[74] It is interesting to note that these behaviours have garnered societal acceptance. Beyond its focus on preserving the institution of marriage and curtailing unintended pregnancies, this study also aimed to contribute to the broader efforts to combating the proliferation of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, among the youth. In the light of these considerations, it becomes evident that addressing the decline in youth engagement with the church is not solely a matter of congregational concern but is a multi-faceted phenomenon that has potential implications for societal values, relationships, and the broader health of the youth population.

The continuity of these shadow-casting factors may precipitate the escalation of lawlessness and disorder within and beyond the church's confines, potentially leading to increased mental health challenges among young individuals and a higher incidence of

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[69] Pretorius and Theron, "'A Pillar of Strength': Empowering Women and the Resilience of Township-Dwelling Adolescents."

[70] Garth Aziz, "Youth Ministry as an Agency of Youth Development for the Vulnerable Youth of the Cape Flats," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1–6, https://doi.org/https://doi. org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1745.

[71] STATS SA, "SA Population Reaches 58,8 Million," Statistics South Africa, 2019, www.statssa.gov.za/?p=12362.

[72] Andrew Phiri and Doreen Mukuka, "Does Unemployment Aggravate Suicide Rates in South Africa? Some Empirical Evidence" (Potchefstroom, 2017).

[73] Elisabet Le Roux, Elina Hankela, and Zahraa McDonald, "Social Justice Required: Youth at the Margins, Churches and Social Cohesion in South Africa," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 3 (2018): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.5046.

[74] Thinandavha D. Mashau, "Cohabitation and Premarital Sex amongst Christian Youth in South Africa Today: A Missional Reflection," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 67, no. 2 (2011), https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i2.899.

incarceration. Verster points the critical importance of addressing the current global challenges out with regard to war, poverty, illness, hatred, destruction, dictatorship, and oppression.[75] Notably, the African continent grapples with profound and unresolved issues. Petersen et al. shed light on the concerning landscape of mental health, revealing that one in three South Africans experiences a mental health issue at some point in his or her life.[76] Alarmingly, Kandala highlights that crime statistics in South Africa indicate the prevalence of offending behaviour, particularly among adolescents and young adults aged 18 to 25.[77] This unsettling trend suggests that many offenders fall within the youth ministry age group.

A significant challenge also arises from a distorted theology; it has the potential to inflict more harm than provide any benefits. Ntetha has valid concerns regarding the multitude of activities occurring under the umbrella of a youth ministry, while a noticeable absence of a practical theological understanding is observed.[78] A youth ministry should be recognised as a national "asset." This fact motivates the author to advocate for a more intentional approach from churches. Amidst rising misinformation, psychotherapists face the challenge of encountering clients harbouring scientifically unsound and harmful distorted beliefs, which can lead to ethical dilemmas. Conlin and Bonnes highlight how distorted beliefs, such as the vaccination refusal or misunderstanding sexual consent, can complicate the psychotherapy progress and even endanger the well-being of clients and society.[79] This underscores the therapists' dilemma when deciding how to proceed in such situations.

When exploring the intricate interplay between intellectuality and religiosity, Çağlar addresses the contentious relationship between these concepts.[80] While studies have debated the influence of intelligence and education on religiosity, the author introduces a dynamic model to navigate this ambiguity. The model suggests that individuals, particularly during their formative years, choose between belief, disbelief, or scepticism. The findings indicate that the trajectory of belief, whether increasing or decreasing, stems from the initial choice to favour doubt.[81] This sheds light on the evolving nature of religiosity and its connection with intellectual development, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of how belief systems unfold over time. Most importantly, this underscores the crucial role of the early guidance of the youth, ensuring that they establish a strong foundation in their faith to foster lasting connections with Christ in the future.

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[75] Pieter Verster, "Church and Community: New Hope for Africa," *Missionalia* 50, no. 1 (2022): 59–73, https://doi.org/10.7832/50-1-461.

[76] Inge Petersen et al., "Integrating Mental Health into Chronic Care in South Africa: The Development of a District Mental Healthcare Plan," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 208, no.56 (2016): 29-39, https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.114.153726.

[77] Lupwana Kandala, "Perspectives on Crime Theories and Juvenile's Recidivism Based on Socio -Economic Variables in South Africa," *Forensic Research & Criminology International Journal* 6, no. 5 (2018): 339–46, https://doi.org/10.15406/frcij.2018.06.00226.

[78] Ntetha, "A Practical Theological Reflection of the Youth Ministry in Khayelitsha."

[79] William E Conlin and Cassandra L Bonnes, "Ethical Considerations for Addressing Distorted Beliefs in Psychotherapy," *Physiology & Behavior* 176, no. 5 (2020): 139–48. https://doi.org/10.4049/jimmunol.1801473.The.

[80] Mustafa Emre Çağlar, "Why Does Intellectuality Weaken Faith and Sometimes Foster It?," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00567-y.

[81] Çağlar, "Why Does Intellectuality Weaken Faith and Sometimes Foster It?" 1-17.

Religious engagement holds a protective function amid the potential consequences of the declining youth participation in the church. As highlighted by the OECD (2015), utilising participatory methodologies cultivates vital soft skills, self-awareness, and personal identity formation among young individuals, interlinked with improved education, employment prospects, and income potential.[82] Active youth involvement in public affairs fosters their future engagement as responsible adults, thereby benefiting individuals and society. Empowering young women is also vital within this framework, as Pretorius and Theron emphasised in their strategy for effective adolescent adjustment in townships.[83] The church contributes to holistic development and societal improvement by embracing and empowering young women and men. Reflecting on the example of Jesus, Oyetade underscores leadership's role as the metaphorical salt and light, preserving goodness and illuminating the path for others, thus aligning with the biblical principles of Matthew 5:13-14.[84] This call for inspirational leadership highlights the aspiration of leaders to embody the qualities that inspire emulation within the global community.

As Pillay has emphasised, the church possesses the capacity to be a potent agent of transformation and positive change.[85] The early missionaries' dedicated efforts in the 19th century, resulting in establishing churches, schools, and hospitals, laid the foundation for thriving black churches in the 20th century, thereby influencing the emergence of African theology. This intentional movement sought to worship and interpret Christianity from an African perspective, address contemporary challenges, and strive for a just and harmonious world. Pillay emphasises the renewed responsibility of the Christian church to foster positive transformation actively amid societal hardships and reflect the enduring Gospel message. Similarly, Aziz highlights the pivotal role of the youth ministry in community youth development, particularly in challenging socio-economic environments.[86] By facilitating risk reduction and cultivating positive moral attributes, the youth ministry becomes a transformative force, aligning with Pillay's call for intentional efforts toward positive change.

The absence of a positive religious influence may affect young people's moral and spiritual well-being. As emphasised previously by Sung and Korea, young people leave the church due to its perceived lack of a welcoming and forgiving atmosphere.[87] Their disappointment arises from their struggle to maintain a double-faced social life and navigate conflicting relationships with the opposite sex. Consequently, they find themselves grieving without adequate support or assistance from the church. Thus, they may feel isolated and unsupported by the church, leading to a decline in their moral and spiritual well-being. This negative outcome underscores the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive environment within the church to retain and nurture the faith of young individuals.

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[82] OECD, "Beyond Smiling Faces: How Engaging with Youth Can Help Transform Societies and Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals."

[83] Pretorius and Theron, "'A Pillar of Strength': Empowering Women and the Resilience of Township-Dwelling Adolescents."

[84] Oyetade, "Salt and Light in Matthew 5:13-14: A Paradigm for Democratic Sustainability in Nigeria," 6.

[85] Jerry Pillay, "The Church as a Transformation and Change Agent," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4352.

[86] Aziz, "Youth Ministry as an Agency of Youth Development for the Vulnerable Youth of the Cape Flats," 1-7.

[87] Sung and Korea, "Why Are Young People Leaving Churches ? Form of Belief."

In addition to the above, societal neglect often leaves the youth feeling overlooked, leading them to neglect their vital role in the Gospel propagation, and choosing superficial pursuits.[88] This trend is underscored by a concerning embrace of consumerism, luring many young individuals into technology's allure, and eroding their spiritual connection with Jesus. These shifts also weaken familial ties, detaching the youth from the Gospel dissemination. Thus, their reduced involvement in sharing the Gospel reflects a decline in their moral and spiritual well-being.

Cassidy and Tsarenko explored church participation perceptions, noting a decline in traditional religious institutions alongside a rise in personalised expressions of faith.[89] This shift prompted a rational decision-making approach to church engagement, linking involvement with perceived benefits. The absence of a church can impacts the youth's spiritual well-being by depriving them of these perceived benefits. Bergler reveals the reasons for youth disengagement, including a disconnect between beliefs and Christianity, an unfriendly church environment, and a quest for answers beyond religious authorities.[90] Addressing these generational disparities requires tailored approaches that acknowledge unique values and experiences. Without the church, the youth may disengage from faith matters, seeking answers elsewhere and distancing themselves from spiritual pursuits.

Noted in this section is that the absence of the church from these scenarios would result in a range of adverse outcomes for both individuals and society at large. It would lead to a decline in young people's moral and spiritual well-being, potentially leaving them isolated, unsupported, and disconnected from matters of faith. Furthermore, the absence of the church's positive influence could weaken familial bonds, promote the shift towards consumerism and superficial pursuits, and diminish engagement in the Gospel dissemination. Moreover, the absence of the church's guidance and support could hamper young people's ability to make informed decisions and navigate complex challenges. Overall, the church plays a vital role in shaping the well-being, values, and engagement of the youth, and its absence would have far-reaching consequences that impact individuals, families, and society as a whole.

In conclusion, the role of Christianity and biblical principles in addressing the challenges faced by the South African youth is multi-faceted and deeply rooted in foundational teachings. These biblical principles offer a comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges the South African youth face, fostering a positive change and spiritual growth within the church and society.

Role of Christianity and biblical perspectives

To retain and attract the youth, Christianity must assume a leadership role centred on prayer and a meticulously crafted strategy. The foundation of Christianity is often understood

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[88] Gladys Kerubo Ragira, Rispah N Wepukhulu, and Savala Angeline, "Role of Youth In The Church," *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* 22, no. 12 (2017): 49–52, https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2212024952.

[89] Riza Casidy and Yelena Tsarenko, "Perceived Benefits and Church Participation: A Comparative Study among Regular and Irregular Church Goers," *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics* 26, no. 5 (2014): 761–76, https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-04-2014-0055.

[90] Thomas E. Bergler, "Generation Z and Spiritual Maturity," *Christian Education Journal* 17, no. 1 (2020): 75–91, https://doi.org/10.1177/0739891320903058.

to be rooted in respect and love for God, which is nurtured through prayer and a deepening relationship with Him. Moore highlights the paramount importance of prayer as the initial and fundamental step in tackling the challenges of the declining church youth attendance.[91] He emphasises that the more spiritual leaders engage in prayer, the greater the divine intervention, ultimately leading to positive outcomes. After prayer, the implementation strategy unfolds, guiding students through life transformation. This strategy involves a structured planning process comprising six stages: vision aligning, assessing the starting point, identifying the desired outcomes, establishing key performance indicators, ensuring accountability and collaboration, and continuous evaluation.[92] Through these deliberate and systematic steps, the aim is to address the issue of the declining youth involvement in the church and foster a path of positive change.

As discussed previously, the church must align with the current youth context to support the outlined strategy effectively. This principle emphasises the importance of adapting and tailoring approaches to specific contexts while maintaining a foundation rooted in Christian principles.[93] In the New Testament in the Bible, the apostle Paul demonstrated contextualisation in his ministry by adapting his message and methods to the cultural and religious backgrounds of the people he was reaching. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul talks about becoming all things to all people in order to save some. This means he was willing to adjust his approach to communicate the Gospel and connect with diverse audiences effectively. Weber asserts that no universally applicable structure model for running a youth ministry exists.[94] Instead, the chosen model should be context-based, considering the unique vision, mission, and specific needs of the contexts in which they are implemented. This approach recognises the importance of tailoring youth ministry strategies to effectively serve the diverse and distinct communities they aim to reach.

"Love and freedom," derived from biblical teachings, must be at the heart of youth engagement. This principle encompasses the concepts of 'care,' 'affection,' 'warmth,' and 'granting freedom to individuals.' According to Barry and Lorraine, an effective parenting style rooted in love and freedom is crucial for nurturing the youth's faith, psychological well-being, and emotional health.[95] Similarly, Weber suggests that congregations should involve young individuals actively with supportive guidance in their pursuit of faith, mirroring the principles of care and empowerment.[96] By applying the "love and freedom principle,' the church can create an environment that combines nurturing support with the space for personal growth and development. This approach respects the autonomy and individuality of the youth while providing the necessary guidance and support for their faith journey. Just as God's love for humanity allows for individual freedom and choice, the church can reflect this principle by fostering an atmosphere of care, understanding, and empowerment that enables young individuals to flourish spiritually and emotionally.

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[91] Temaris Moore, "Youth Discipleship Framework for Church Revitalization" (PhD Thesis, Liberty University School of Divinity, 2022).

[92] Moore, "Youth Discipleship Framework for Church Revitalization."

[93] Weber, "Decolonising Youth Ministry Models ? Challenges and Opportunities in Africa Brief History of Scripture Union in Africa."

[94] Weber, "Decolonising Youth Ministry Models?" 1-10.

[95] Barry and Lorraine, "Youth Participation and Community Change: An Introduction," 107-23.

[96] Weber, "Faith, Culture and Youth Ministry in South Africa. The Impact of Traditional Cultural Practices on the Faith Formation of Youth," 133-51.

Parents, church leaders, and youth mentors must exemplify a godly lifestyle and lead through their actions. The significance of embracing comprehensive Christian living, rooted in the teachings of Jesus, is a guiding principle for nurturing the youth. Amevenku and Boaheng Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is a timeless guide for 21st-century Christians.[97] It is regarded as the pinnacle of Jesus' teachings and embodies the essence of Christianity. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is a significant and well-known discourse in the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5 to 7. The relevance of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount lies in its comprehensive and transformative teachings. It addresses the fundamental aspects of Christian living, including ethics, morality, and spiritual attitudes. This sermon covers various topics, from the beatitudes that outline blessedness and virtues to teachings on love, forgiveness, prayer, and humility. In the context of the 21st century, where individuals face complex moral dilemmas, ethical challenges, and rapid societal changes, the Sermon on the Mount offers a moral compass and ethical framework. Its teachings encourage believers to cultivate a heart of compassion, integrity, and righteousness, promoting harmonious relationships and a deep connection with God.

Christianity holds the potential to bridge cultural and worldview gaps while remaining anchored in the core biblical message.[98] It is illustrated in the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4, Christ adeptly engages with diverse backgrounds, tailoring His message to the woman's context through the metaphor of the "living water." Ndereba advocates a comprehensive youth engagement approach encompassing various African worldviews, from traditional to modern and postmodern.[99] Webber et al. suggest that history demonstrates teenagers' yearning to encounter the true God amid societal shifts.[100] Protestant youth ministries have historically aimed to guide the youth towards transformative divine experiences. This highlights the biblical principle of cultural relevance and contextualisation, urging an understanding of African youths' diverse worldviews while remaining faithful to the gospel truths, mirroring Jesus' approach in John 4.

The church can journey alongside and guide young individuals, leading them towards the light. Also important is the concept of intentional discipleship and guidance, exemplified by Jesus' interactions with His disciples on the road to Emmaus. In Luke 24:13-35, Jesus accompanies and engages with the two disciples, providing them with guidance, teaching, and clarity about the scriptures and His identity. Similarly, Selvam emphasises the importance of intentional and deliberate steps in accompanying young people on their spiritual journey within the church.[101] This principle underscores the role of mentors and leaders in walking alongside the youth, providing guidance, support, and teachings that help them navigate the challenges and transitions they face. Just as Jesus engaged with His disciples on their journey, modern youth ministers are encouraged to emulate this approach

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[97] Isaac Mawusi Amevenku and Frederick Boaheng, "Interpreting Jesus' Sermon on the Mount for a 21st Century Christians," 18, May (2020): 69-90.

[98] Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, "Engaging Youth Worldviews in Africa: A Practical Theology in Light of John 4," *Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* 32, no. 1 (2021): 187–98, https://doi.org/10.54725/conspectus.2021.2.11.

[99] Ndereba, "Engaging Youth Worldviews in Africa: A Practical Theology in Light of John 4," 187-98.

[100] Ruth Webber et al., "Models of Youth Ministry in Action: The Dynamics of Christian Youth Ministry in an Australian City," *Religious Education* 105, no. 2 (2010): 204–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344081003645202.

[101] Selvam, "Walking with the Young: A Theology of Youth Ministry in Africa." 65-80.

in guiding young individuals through their metaphorical journeys and transitions, whether geographical or existential. To prepare young people for the youth ministry, Ntetha suggests providing financial support, particularly for those aspiring to study to enter the ministry.[102] By investing in the training and education of young individuals, churches can nurture a capable and dedicated generation of youth ministers, ensuring a more effective and impactful youth ministry in the future. This strategic investment not only bridges the existing gaps, but also ensures the cultivation of an effective and impactful youth ministry that is well-equipped to navigate the challenges of today and guide the church's future.

Christianity and the church's role in youth development are firmly grounded in scripture, as verses and principles emphasise the importance of involving young individuals in the church and providing early spiritual guidance. Proverbs 22:6 underscores the lasting impact of early training. Hering critically examines Proverbs 22:6, questioning its consistency as a parental success formula, emphasizing the pivotal role of parents in providing instruction for adulthood, and proposing that the lack of specific methodological guidance allows interpretative latitude.[103] In contrast, Hildebrandt contends for a reinterpretation, suggesting that the phrase "train up a child" bestows status and responsibility on a late adolescent, urging a celebration of their entrance into adult society with respect and corresponding responsibilities.[104] Together, these perspectives highlight the complexity of the proverb and its potential for broader application beyond traditional childrearing concerns, prompting a nuanced understanding within the context of youth ministry and engagement.

While the critical engagement with Proverbs 22:6 raises questions about its consistency, other Scriptures, such as Deuteronomy 6:6-7, emphasizing continuous teaching, Psalm 78:4 stressing the duty of passing down God's stories, Joel 2:28 prophesying empowerment by the Holy Spirit, and Ephesians 6:4 reminding parents of their role in nurturing spiritual growth, collectively underscore the supremacy of God's Word in various aspects of young people's lives. These verses, while some addressing children specifically, collectively affirm the universal principle of embracing and nurturing the youth, providing a broader biblical foundation for understanding the role of youth ministry.

Strategies for revitalisation

Global research has proposed various strategies to revitalise the youth ministry, addressing the challenges of declining attendance and engagement. The first section contains a comprehensive list of revitalisation strategies, which synthesise diverse approaches. Frisbie suggests leveraging social media platforms like Facebook as dynamic marketing tools and effective information management channels to connect with today's youth that are well-versed in technology (tech-savvy).[105] Gurney offers a comprehensive approach, recommends harmonious collaboration, enhanced Sunday school programmes, comprehensive training for youth pastors, and promotes healthy families and fellowship to invigorate the youth

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[102] Ntetha, "A Practical Theological Reflection of the Youth Misnitry in Khayelitsha."

[103] James P Hering, "Rethinking the Promise of Proverbs 22 : 6," *Haddington House Journal* 10, no. 7 (2008): 65–72.

[104] Theodore A Hildebrandt, "Proverbs 22:6a: Train up a Child?," *Grace Theological Journal* 9, no. 1 (1988): 3–19, http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/gtj/09-1_003.

[105] Scott W Frisbie, "A Study of Church Attendance among Young Adults" (PhD Thesis, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2016).

ministry.[106] Dortch introduces a framework for engaging with and retaining the youth post-high school, focusing on spiritual habits, relationships, Bible study, active church participation, stewardship, and scripture memorisation.[107]

Prioritising relationships is emphasised by Roehlkepartain et al. as a means of combating youth loneliness, and suggested developmental relationships that aid self-discovery and equip young people to engage with their world.[108] Ndereba underscores theological education, discipleship, cultural sensitivity, and public theology as being integral to an effective youth ministry.[109] In turn, Moser calls for re-evaluating the attractional model, advocating meaningful connections between the youth and the church without compromising values.[110] In addition, Theron highlights the potential of Christian higher education to integrate faith and intellectual pursuits, enabling students to apply their skills to spiritual and tangible community needs.

This study highlights impactful strategies from other regions that can inspire South Africa's Church to counter the declining youth engagement. For instance, the Hillsong Church in Sydney engages the youth effectively through contemporary music and the creative arts, fosters meaningful connections and self-expression.[111] Their success underscores the significance of blending the cultural appeal with biblical teachings. Observations by Murray reveal that the youth that seek spiritual experiences are drawn to alternative forms of worship like Hillsong's, indicating evolving preferences.[112] Furthermore, Riches and Wagner stress the role of branding in megachurch growth, exemplified by Hillsong's global influence.[113] This trend suggests innovation in worship and branding resonates, guiding strategies to revitalise youth engagement across diverse religious contexts.

Accordingly, mainline, and Pentecostal churches possess a distinct opportunity to utilise their musical prowess for church growth, as suggested by Kgatle.[114] Music is integral to their worship, serving as a liturgical and therapeutic tool. Kgatle's (2019) insight reveals how singing extends beyond the religious practice as a holistic remedy for spiritual, physical, emotional, and psychological challenges. By emphasising music's therapeutic dimensions, these churches can attract a broader audience, including those seeking healing and solace, and align with contemporary trends favouring holistic well-being and experiential spirituality.

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[106] Gurney, "Why School Leavers Abandon Church."

[107] Christopher Dale Dortch, "Best Practises for Retaining Youth Group Students in the Local Church Post High School" (PhD Thesis, Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014).

[108] Eugene Roehlkepartain et al., "Relationships First: Creating Connections That Help Young People Thrive," *Search Institute* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 2017), https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.34486.09282.

[109] Ndereba, "Engaging Youth Worldviews in Africa: A Practical Theology in Light of John 4," 187-98.

[110] Kenneth Andrew Moser, "The Funnerl Model for Youth Misnitry and Young People Leaving the Church" (PhD Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2019).

[111] Lisa Murray, "Why Hillsong and 'church Planting' Appeal to Gen Z,"; Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner, "The Evolution of Hillsong Music: From Australian Pentecostal Congregation into Global Brand."

[112] Murray, "Why Hillsong and 'church Planting' Appeal to Gen Z."

[113] Riches and Wagner, "The Evolution of Hillsong Music: From Australian Pentecostal Congregation into Global Brand 17-36.

[114] Mookgo S. Kgatle, "Singing as a Therapeutic Agent in Pentecostal Worship," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40, no. 1 (2019): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1910.

This strategic use of music can enhance worship experiences and elevate the relevance and growth of these churches in society.

Small group meetings have also worked well to attract young people. Another initiative that has borne fruit in youth development and growth is the Saddleback Church's (California, USA) "purpose-driven" approach, which extends to the youth ministry. They emphasise providing opportunities for the youth to discover and live out their God-given purposes.[115] Through small groups, mentorship, and community service projects, Saddleback encourages the youth to participate actively in their faith journey and contribute to the well-being of their communities. Within the Pentecostal domain, this could work well for the youth spread throughout the country; be it at school or churches, they could still form part of the church and meet regularly. In addition to the above, this could solve the age gap differences in ministries where young people also meet with their cohort and engage in matters that pertain to them.

Looking at the holistic needs of young people as a whole, the Salem Baptist Church in Chicago, USA, has a range of programmes, including education, mentorship and community outreach.[116] It can thus be argued that by addressing the social and educational challenges the youth face in urban contexts, the Salem Baptist Church demonstrates a commitment to youth development that extends beyond the church's walls.

Creating youth-friendly spaces has proven to be effective in other churches. The Triangle Community Church in Apex, New York City, introduced the Next Gen Discipleship Center in 2015, a $1.6 million facility with stadium seating, a games room, and an inviting design.[117] This dedicated space, distinct from the main church structures, resonates with young members, fostering a sense of value and belonging. While replicating this model may not be feasible for every church, the Triangle Community Church's commitment to engaging the next generation showcases the importance of prioritising the youth's needs, creating inclusive spaces, and building community. This example inspires Pentecostal churches in South African townships and encourages innovative approaches to enhance youth engagement and church growth.

Integrating modern approaches and technology is a pivotal strategy to engage and retain the youth. Churches use technology increasingly to connect with young people, recognising the significance of effective communication and meaningful relationships in pastoral work, as emphasised by the National Federation for the Catholic Youth Ministry.[118] This alignment with the vision for the youth ministry, which centres on evangelisation and catechesis, necessitates adopting digital tools, such as church websites, social media platforms, email and text communication, video engagement, and secure registration technology for privacy. Saputro et al. affirm the impact of technology-savvy millennials and Generation Z on online platforms and accentuate the potential of leveraging social media for

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[115] Saddleback Valley Community Church, "Where Are You Headed?," Saddleback Valley Community Church, 2023, https://doi.org/10.12968/sece.2015.22.7.

[116] Salem Baptist Church of Chicago, "Home | Salem Baptist Church of Chicago Home | Salem Baptist Church of Chicago," Salem Baptist Church of Chicago, 2023, https://www.salemchicago.org/.

[117] Boxcast, "The Unconventional Way This Church Is Attracting Its Youth," Boxcast, 2019, https://www.boxcast.com/blog/the-unconventional-way-this-church-is-attracting-its-youth.

[118] National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, "Recommended Technology Guidelines for Pastoral Work with Young People" (National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, 2010).

engagement.[119] Afolaranmi extends this discourse to educational ministries, by highlighting the transformative shift from traditional to digital platforms,[120] thereby enhancing accessibility and efficiency through multimedia resources. By embracing modern approaches and technology, the church can bridge the gap between traditional teaching and the digital preferences of today's youth, foster a dynamic and impactful engagement with the Gospel message, while nurturing meaningful connections.

These case studies highlight the diversity of successful strategies different churches and organisations employ to revitalise youth engagement. While each context may vary, common themes include relevant and creative programming, mentorship and leadership development, community involvement, and a strong emphasis on authentic relationships and personal growth. Adapting and tailoring these principles to the specific cultural and social context of South Africa can provide a foundation for effective youth revitalisation strategies.

Conclusion

The literature review explored various strategies and principles for revitalising the church youth engagement, by focusing on the challenges the South African youth face. By drawing on Christian teachings, this review highlighted the central role of prayer, contextualisation, love and freedom, comprehensive Christian living, and cultural relevance in addressing declining youth attendance. It also examined successful initiatives like technological integration, music, branding, and case studies like the Hillsong Church. Furthermore, this review underscored the importance of tailored approaches, intentional discipleship, and fostering meaningful relationships. In short, these findings emphasised the need for innovative strategies rooted in Christian principles to engage and nurture the faith of South African youth effectively within the contemporary context.

This researcher contends that addressing the decline in youth engagement in the church is paramount due to its potential far-reaching impact on the holistic development of South African youth. The church is vital for nurturing their spiritual well-being and personal, emotional, and social growth. A decline in youth involvement could lead to a gap in opportunities for character formation, moral guidance, and a sense of belonging that the church traditionally provides. Given the challenges young people face in South Africa, including socio-economic disparities, identity exploration, and cultural shifts, robust and active youth engagement within the church can offer essential support and guidance. Therefore, revitalising youth participation in the church becomes a critical endeavour in safeguarding the well-rounded development and positive trajectories of the youth population in the country. Future research on the youth ministry could examine the impact of emerging digital platforms and technology on youth engagement within religious contexts, exploring how virtual spaces can complement physical interactions effectively.

Furthermore, investigating the role of mentorship and intergenerational relationships within the youth ministry and how these dynamics contribute to spiritual growth and identity formation, presents a promising avenue for research. Another potential area of exploration lies in understanding the intersection of cultural diversity and the youth ministry, focusing on developing inclusive strategies that resonate with a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

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[119] Roman Hadi Saputro et al., "Gaining Millenial and Generation Z Vote: Social Media Optimization by Islamic Political Parties," *Res Militaris* 13, no. 1 (2023): 323–36.

[120] Adebayo Afolaranmi, "Effective Use of Technological Tools in Building the Church's Educational Ministries," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (July, 2020), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3621635.

Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term effects of innovative youth ministry approaches on the faith trajectories, and the overall well-being of young individuals could provide valuable insights. Finally, given the changing landscape of spirituality and religiosity, examining the evolving nature of religious beliefs and practices among the youth and how these trends influence their engagement with traditional church structures, would contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary youth ministry.

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