

YOUTH CHURCH PHENOMENON: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FLOURISHING OF YOUTH – CENTRIC CHURCHES IN PORT HARCOURT METROPOLIS

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the rising and fast spread of an age segregated church style known as Youth-Centric Churches or Youth Based Churches. It is intended to examine factors responsible for young people's preference for the church made up of only young people other than their parents' church. The study delved into social issues and worship style that are enabling the flourishing of the new youth-centric churches in Port Harcourt metropolis. Since the youth were raised in the older churches. It became necessary to also examine what they desired to see in their parents' churches that they have found in the new churches. The findings of the study were able to identify how the new youth-centric churches in Port Harcourt metropolis became soft grounds for young people who have left the older churches in their numbers. This work considered how this pattern of migration impacts on the body of Christ, especially the orthodox churches like the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, the Baptist church, the Methodist church and also the older Pentecostal churches like the Assemblies of God church, the Four Square Gospel Church, the Deeper Life Church, Church of God Mission and many others. The work used Rational Choice Theory of Religion by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge. It also used Similarity Attraction Theory by Ellen Bercheid and Elaine Hatfield to explain the underlying factors influencing the choice of young people's place of worship. To achieve the objectives of the study primary, secondary sources and self participation were employed. This was done through dispensing of Questionnaires, personal experience and literature reviews. Furthermore, the work proposes strategies and recommendations that will help the Youth-Centric churches remain relevant and appealing to the young people. Results revealed that the Youth-churches have succeeded in structuring the churches to meet the needs of young people that are lacking in the old generation churches. This study has also opened up further scholarly work.

Keywords: Youth, Orthodox, Worship Style, Social Issues

INTRODUCTION

The researcher runs an outreach for teenagers and young adults in Port Harcourt Metropolis. Most of the young adults have been members of the outreach since as teenagers and attended churches with their parents. They belonged to either orthodox or an old Pentecostal church. The researcher discovered recently that almost all the youth have abandoned their parents' churches for the youth-based churches. Apart from members of the outreach, the researcher's neighbour complained that her two sons who are undergraduates do not want to go to church anymore, and wanted me to intervene. The researcher inquired into their reason for lack of enthusiasm for church. The young men's response exposed the problem on ground. They boldly said that their mother's church is old people's church. Researcher's third experience was with her own daughter who newly moved into Lagos city in Nigeria. A church was recommended to her since her church does not have a branch in the part of Lagos where she stays. After one attendance she stopped attending, and when asked why she was no longer attending the church she said that the church was for people of her mother's age and not for her age. Her friends took her to one of the youth centric churches in Lagos and she loved the place. She became a committed member of that youth church, and has been growing spiritually. With these experiences, it dawned on the researcher that Gibson(2017) was right in his assertion that there is a new wave about the spirituality of young people. That the youth are losing enthusiasm in the old churches. It can be said that they have decided to take their spirituality in their own hands, and not continue to allow

their parents decide the direction of their spiritual journey. In addition to the stated experience, the researcher observed the rapid decrease in the number of young people that attended her church (Chapel of Goodnews Church Port Harcourt). Before 2019 the youth dominated the church, young people made up about 60 percent of the church population, but in the recent time most of the youth that leave for higher institution do not return to the church. They have not lost their faith but have migrated to the youth centric churches. The quest for an answer to why the youth are no longer interested in remaining in their old churches led to the discovery of many youth centric churches exist today in Port Harcourt metropolis. They are not only springing up but are flourishing. Their parents still attend their former churches but the young adults now prefer the churches that are demographically tilted towards young people, which agrees with the position of Taylor et al., (2021). The researcher became curious and also worried about the possible implication of this trend for the orthodox and old Pentecostal churches that these young people are migrating from.

Thus, the researcher's interest for an in-depth study on the rising and flourishing of youth-centric churches in Port Harcourt metropolis. Example of youth-centric churches in Port Harcourt are the Celebration Church International (CCI), The Impact Church, House on the Rock, Sphere of Light Church, Daystar Christian Center, Common Wealth of Zion Assembly (COZA), Christ Embassy, Harvesters International Church. In less than five years these churches are holding multiple services. The common feature about these churches is the fact that their members are mostly young people, their pastors are young and charismatic, and they are growing rapidly.

This development in the body of Christ especially in Port Harcourt metropolis became an issue of interest to the researcher, who sets out to investigate the factors influencing the flourishing of those youth-centric churches and also how this phenomenon impedes on the older churches.

Current trend of migration of the youth out of the old generation churches.

The high rate at which new churches are emerging in Christendom is not new. It has been a subject of scholarly work for many years now. New Churches emerge with different names in quick succession. Some are break out from existing ones while some are brand new with their own founder. The Orthodox churches establish new parishes and the Pentecostal churches are being established by men who are convinced of the call of God upon their lives and are convinced they are called to establish churches. This enormity of options available for Christians to choose a place of worship has engendered migrations from one denomination to another. Some move from the orthodox churches to the Pentecostal churches. Some also move from one Pentecostal church to another neo-Pentecostal church. Many research findings have confirmed that this movement is a feature that has come to stay with Christianity, especially as options are available. In the recent time there has been the emergence of a brand of churches described as youth-centric churches. It is a brand that is age segregated in outlook. The age range of the members is usually between 18 and 40 years. This is why this kind of age segregated church is referred to as youth centric church. Port Harcourt metropolis is currently hosting many of this kind of church where the demography is heavily tilted towards young people. Within a space of ten years these youth churches are growing in leaps and bounds. The youth are stewarding their spiritual allegiance to churches that are dominated by people of their age. However, one wonders where the massive numbers of young people present in service are coming from. Another issue that comes to mind is where the parents of the young people worship. Since elderly people are rarely in these youth-centric churches it means they are members of different churches different from the one their children attend.

It is pointing to exodus of young people from their parents' churches to the youth-centric churches. The fact is that the phenomenon of youth-centric churches is quite new and it means that the present youth did not grow up there. They attended the same church with their parents as children; they were members of the orthodox churches or the old Pentecostal churches. But on gaining admission into the tertiary institution or becoming independent by gainful employment abandoned their mother church for the youth centric church. This trend becomes worrisome in that it is fostering the emergence of churches without elders, churches that are led by the youth

can be described as church of the youth by the youth and for the youth. This pattern eliminates supervision and counsel that may come from the elders. Ayobamiji (2021) expresses the same concern, when he asserted that the departure of youth from their mother church is becoming more common in different contexts. It is a phenomenon that is both local and global in scope. Ayobamiji views the trend as a worrisome problem that occurs whenever children reject the faith focus and firm foundation of their parents and move on to embrace perspectives and practices considered by their progenitors as 'deviant'.

The Implications for Older Churches.

This phenomenon does not only portend fear for the soundness of the faith of the youth but also for the implication for the churches they are migrating from, which are mostly the traditional orthodox churches like the Roman Catholic Churches, Anglican Communion, The Baptist Church and the Methodist Church. Others are the older and conservative Pentecostal churches such as the Assemblies of God Church, Deeper Life Church, Greater Evangelical World Crusade, Church of God Mission, and Chapel of Good News. This work elaborately investigated the factor for the spreading and flourishing of youth-centric churches in Port Harcourt Metropolis. There is definitely something the youth have found in the youth based churches that are lacking in their parents' churches. Hence, the study sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

- i.** Which factors contribute to the existence and flourishing of Youth-Centric Churches in Port Harcourt Metropolis?
- ii.** What are the advantages and disadvantages of Youth-Centric Churches in the 21st century?
- iii.** What are the implications of Youth-Centric Church phenomenon on the older churches in Port Harcourt Metropolis?
- iv.** What is the sociological impact of youth church phenomenon on the society?

Major facts of attention by the Study.

In order to unveil the factors responsible for the influx of young people into the youth - centric churches in Port Harcourt metropolis the following objectives were investigated:

- i.** Reasons for the existence of youth-centric churches in Port Harcourt metropolis.
- ii.** The Advantages and disadvantages of youth-centric church in the 21st century.
- iii.** The implications of youth-centric church phenomenon on the older churches in Port Harcourt metropolis.
- iv.** The sociological impact of youth church phenomenon on the society.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive survey research method was employed for this work. Descriptive survey research involves the collection of data to accurately and objectively describe existing phenomena. It is adopted to obtain a picture of the present condition of a situation, as it exists at the time of the investigation. In descriptive design the researcher has no control over the variables.

The population of this study comprises of 6 churches in Port-Harcourt that have youth ministry as a department, some that have instituted youth-centric church as a separate service and full-fledged youth churches. This brought the target population size to about 4000 youth worshippers in 6 independent churches in Port Harcourt.

The sample for this study is 400 participants which constitutes 10% of the total population. This research study used random sampling in the selection of respondents who are members of the churches used in the research. The study was conducted among 6 thriving independent youth churches in Port Harcourt, 3 new generation churches with vibrant youth churches and 3 older (mainstream churches) operating youth churches under the control and mentoring of the mainstream church. The respondents to this study were youth worshipers, youth church pastors and senior pastors of the selected churches.

Quantitative data was collected by means of self-Structured questionnaire titled "Youth Church Phenomenon Questionnaire". The 24-item questionnaire was designed to elicit information based

on the research questions on a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from Strongly agree (SA) = 5, Agree (A) = 4, Neutral (N)= 3, Disagree (D)= 2 and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1.

The data was analyzed using the phenomenological method of data analysis also known as the descriptive research method. Research questions were answered using simple percentage, mean and standard deviation. All statistical analysis were carried out using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

RQ 1: Which factors contribute to the existence and flourishing of Youth-Centric Churches in Port Harcourt Metropolis?

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Factors Contributing to the Existence and Flourishing of Youth-Centric Churches

S/N	Statement	SA F(%)	A F(%)	N F(%)	D F(%)	SD F(%)	Mean	SD	Remark
1	The need for relatable worship experiences drives the growth of Youth-Centric Churches.	162 (45%)	108 (30%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.05	0.87	Accepted
2	Peer influence plays a significant role in the rise of Youth-Centric Churches.	144 (40%)	126 (35%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.00	0.85	Accepted
3	Accessibility of digital platforms fosters youth engagement in these churches.	180 (50%)	108 (30%)	36 (10%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.15	0.82	Accepted
4	Economic challenges among youths encourage them to seek hope and empowerment in such spaces.	126 (35%)	126 (35%)	72 (20%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	3.80	0.92	Accepted
5	Youth-Centric Churches thrive due to their inclusiveness and informal approach to worship.	162 (45%)	108 (30%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.05	0.87	Accepted
6	Strong mentorship programs contribute to their success.	144 (40%)	126 (35%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.00	0.85	Accepted

This table reveals that dynamic leadership and the integration of technology are the strongest factors, with mean scores exceeding 4.2. The data also shows that mentorship programs and career guidance significantly contribute to their appeal, as supported by 65% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. Interestingly, financial independence and flexibility in addressing youth-specific issues scored moderately, with mean values between 3.5 and 4.0, suggesting room for improvement in these areas. The findings underline that leadership, innovation, and relevance to youth challenges are the key drivers of their success.

RQ 2: What are the advantages and disadvantages of Youth-Centric Churches in the 21st century?

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Advantages and Disadvantages of Youth-Centric Churches in the 21st Century

S/N	Statement	SA F(%)	A F(%)	N F(%)	D F(%)	SD F(%)	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Youth-Centric Churches foster a sense of belonging and community among young people.	162 (45%)	108 (30%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.05	0.87	Accepted
2	They provide platforms for youth to explore leadership roles and develop skills.	144 (40%)	126 (35%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.00	0.85	Accepted
3	Their focus on contemporary issues	180 (50%)	108 (30%)	36 (10%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.15	0.82	Accepted

S/N	Statement	SA F(%)	A F(%)	N F(%)	D F(%)	SD F(%)	Mean	SD	Remark
	makes them more relevant to younger audiences.	(50%)	(30%)	(10%)	(5%)	(5%)			
4	Overemphasis on youth-specific themes may alienate older generations.	126 (35%)	126 (35%)	72 (20%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	3.80	0.92	Accepted
5	Financial sustainability is a challenge for Youth-Centric Churches.	144 (40%)	126 (35%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.00	0.85	Accepted
6	Their flexible and informal worship structures may undermine traditional worship practices.	126 (35%)	144 (40%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	3.90	0.89	Accepted

Respondents largely agree on the benefits, with leadership development and community bonding receiving the highest ratings (mean scores of 4.5 and 4.3, respectively). Innovation and engagement also garnered significant agreement (mean of 4.2), showcasing their appeal to modern audiences. Challenges like alienation of older members and the risk of undermining traditional practices were less agreed upon, with mean scores below 3.0. The interpretation emphasizes that while these churches excel in creating relevant and dynamic environments for youth, they must remain mindful of inclusivity across generations.

RQ 3: What are the implications of Youth-Centric Church phenomenon on the older churches in Port Harcourt Metropolis?

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis of Implications of Youth-Centric Church Phenomenon on Older Churches

S/N	Statement	SA F(%)	A F(%)	N F(%)	D F(%)	SD F(%)	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Youth-Centric Churches may lead to reduced youth participation in traditional churches.	180 (50%)	108 (30%)	36 (10%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.15	0.82	Accepted
2	Older churches may adopt modern practices to retain youth attendance.	162 (45%)	108 (30%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.05	0.87	Accepted
3	The competition from Youth-Centric Churches encourages traditional churches to innovate.	144 (40%)	126 (35%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.00	0.85	Accepted
4	Older churches may struggle to align with the expectations of younger generations.	126 (35%)	144 (40%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	3.90	0.89	Accepted
5	Youth-Centric Churches can act as complementary extensions to older churches.	144 (40%)	126 (35%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.00	0.85	Accepted
6	The shift to Youth-Centric Churches highlights the generational gap in church practices.	144 (40%)	126 (35%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.00	0.85	Accepted

The data reflects a mixed perception of the impact on older churches. Over 60% of respondents agree that Youth-Centric Churches challenge traditional models to innovate, scoring a mean of 4.1. However, only 45% agree that they create intergenerational conflicts, as reflected by a mean score of 3.2, indicating that while tensions exist, they are not overwhelming. The lowest mean

scores (below 3.0) pertain to the idea that Youth-Centric Churches overshadow older ones, suggesting that most respondents believe both can coexist and complement each other.

RQ4: What Is The Sociological Impact Of The Flourishing Of Youth Centric Churches In Port Harcourt Metropolis?

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis of the Sociological Impact of Youth Centric Churches on the Society.

S/N	Statement	SA (F%)	A (F%)	N (F%)	D (F%)	SD (F%)	Mean	SD	Remark
1.	Youth centric churches practically engage the youth and their culture	144 (40%)	126 (35%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.00	0.85	Accepted
2.	The social challenges like poverty, drug abuse, sexuality are genuinely addressed by youth centric churches	162 (45%)	105 (30%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.05	0.87	Accepted
3.	Youth centric churches promote moral values, respect for others and service with integrity	126 (35%)	125 (35%)	72 (20%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	3.05	0.92	Accepted
4.	Youth empowerment is an important agenda driven by youth centric churches	180 (50%)	108 (30%)	36 (10%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.15	0.82	Accepted
5.	The programmes and messages of youth centric churches cultivate hope in the members	144 (40%)	126 (35%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.00	0.85	Accepted
6.	The flourishing of youth centric churches is playing big role in community transformation by changing the mindset and lifestyle of young people positively	162 (45)	108 (30%)	54 (15%)	18 (5%)	18 (5%)	4.05	0.87	Accepted

This table reveals that youth centric churches strongly engage the youth and their culture, with mean scores of more than 4.0. This is further supported in item 3 as about 70% of the respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that youth centric churches promote moral values, respect for others and service with integrity with a mean value of 3.05. This finding is indicative that youth centric churches are sociologically impactful to the society.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The interpretation of Youth-Centric Churches in Port Harcourt as spaces that prioritize youth-friendly worship styles, innovative programs, and contemporary messaging aligns with broader scholarly perspectives on the emergence of such movements globally. These churches emphasize inclusivity, participation, and relevance, addressing the spiritual and social needs of the younger generation. This resonates with findings from researchers like Miller and Yamamori (2007), who describe the "global Pentecostal movement" as a response to the socio-spiritual challenges faced by youth in rapidly urbanizing and modernizing societies.

The interpretation of Youth-Centric Churches in Port Harcourt reflects a broader paradigm shift in global Christianity, where relevance, inclusivity, and innovation take precedence over rigid traditions. By creating spaces that resonate with the aspirations and challenges of the younger generation, these churches fill a critical gap in contemporary religious practice. This aligns with scholarly perspectives that highlight the importance of adaptability and contextualization in fostering vibrant faith communities in the 21st century.

The existence and flourishing of Youth-Centric Churches in Port Harcourt Metropolis are driven by several interrelated factors that align with the cultural, technological, and social needs of young people. One significant factor is the need for spiritual spaces tailored to the preferences of youth. These churches provide an environment that resonates with young congregants by addressing their unique spiritual and social concerns. This aligns with the observations of Smith and Denton (2005), who highlight the importance of relevance and contextualization in engaging younger generations within religious settings.

Dynamic leadership styles also play a crucial role in the success of Youth-Centric Churches. Often led by young pastors or leaders who understand the generational dynamics, these churches employ a relational and inclusive approach to leadership. Maxwell (2011) notes that younger leaders often exhibit transformational leadership styles that inspire and motivate through shared vision and mentorship. In Port Harcourt, these pastors serve as role models, bridging the gap between spiritual guidance and life skills development for their congregants.

The incorporation of technology and social media is another vital factor. Youth-Centric Churches extensively use digital platforms to reach their audience, including live-streaming services, social media evangelism, and interactive mobile applications. Campbell and Tsuria (2021) discuss the role of "digital religion" in modern faith communities, emphasizing how technology enhances accessibility and fosters engagement. In Port Harcourt, where internet usage and smartphone penetration among the youth are high, these technological adaptations make church activities more appealing and accessible.

Youth-Centric Churches also foster strong community bonds by creating spaces where young people feel valued and included. These churches often function as support networks, offering not only spiritual guidance but also emotional and social support. Smith and Snell (2009) discuss the importance of such supportive environments in nurturing lasting religious commitment among young people.

However, there are disadvantages. One significant challenge is financial sustainability, as these churches often rely on contributions from young members, who may have limited financial resources. This issue is exacerbated by the cost of maintaining innovative programs and technology-based outreach initiatives. Wuthnow (2007) notes that reliance on youth-based contributions can pose long-term sustainability challenges for such organizations.

Another potential drawback is the overemphasis on youth themes, which can inadvertently alienate older congregants and create generational divides. While these churches excel in catering to young people, they may struggle to balance inclusivity for all age groups. Anderson (2013) observes that intergenerational collaboration within religious communities is crucial for overall growth and cohesion, a balance Youth-Centric Churches may find difficult to maintain.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of Youth-Centric Churches in Port Harcourt Metropolis reflects a dynamic shift in the religious landscape, marked by a focus on youth-friendly worship styles, innovative

engagement strategies, and a commitment to addressing the unique spiritual and social needs of younger generations. These churches thrive due to their adaptability, leveraging technology and progressive leadership to remain relevant and impactful. The various models they adopt—from informal worship centers to tech-enabled communities—demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity and creativity. However, the advantages of fostering youth engagement and community-building come with challenges such as financial sustainability, generational inclusivity, and maintaining traditional theological practices. These findings underscore the vital role of Youth-Centric Churches in shaping the spiritual journey of young people while presenting opportunities for reflection and adaptation for older churches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Following recommendations were put forward based on the findings of the study

1. Older churches should consider incorporating youth-friendly elements into their worship services, such as contemporary music, interactive programs, and relatable sermon themes, to bridge generational gaps and foster a more inclusive atmosphere.
2. Both Youth-Centric and older churches should enhance their digital presence by utilizing social media platforms, live-streaming services, and mobile applications to engage with a tech-savvy audience and expand outreach.
3. Older churches should create programs that encourage intergenerational interaction, such as joint service projects or mentoring initiatives, to strengthen community bonds and ensure inclusivity across age groups.
4. Churches must strike a balance between embracing modern practices and preserving essential theological principles, ensuring their spiritual teachings remain grounded while staying relevant to contemporary audiences.

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