# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Youth: The Under-utilized Resource in Ministry

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*Abstract:*
*The contribution and abilities of young people herein referred to as the youth is under-researched especially as regards their contribution in ministry. They are only appendages to adult ministry. This paper is in two parts. The first part of the paper proposes a review of the youth as emerging adults with immense energy, creativity, capability, knowledge, talent and gifting that can be utilized to serve ministry needs as productive members of society. In this part we look at the African conception of youth spirituality, the youth as mobilized resource that can push ministries to new heights, and how youth who are technologically savvy can increase visibility of churches and participate in the great commission. In the second part of this paper we propose a way forward that can help mainstream the youth resource in the mission of the church. We propose the following strategic engagements for optimal utilization and involvement of youth in ministry: a) Strengthen youth public policy making skills, b) Research-based youth ministry, c) youth as a key stakeholder in ministry, d) Broad-based youth ministry curricula and programs and e) youth volunteerism*

*Keywords: Youth, ministry, youth volunteerism, public policy, church governance, resource*

## 1. Introduction

Historically in society and in academia, the youth have been linked with rebellion (Lerner, 2005).Parents turn to churches as safe havens with potential to tame rebellion and hopefully inculcate values and holistic virtues that would make a young person successful. Inevitably, many churches mirror the society in thinking. Consequently, youth ministries are largely aimed at making the youth happy and engaged to avert rebellion. This fear of rebellion as the organizing principle has interfered with the quality of youth ministry, their programs and activities. Subsequently, youth ministries in an urban context are too often left to their own devices (Arzola, 2008).

The reason for this is that we often fail to see the youth as resource people that carry on ministry programs, church governance and corporate Christian culture to the next generation. When embraced, this way of thinking will intertwine successful youth transition to adulthood with a generative future for church and society.

This approach avoids exclusive gravitation towards any of the three parallel paths (though important) taken by youth ministries in large cities namely; "a traditional paradigm that jealously guards the spiritual formation of its young people, a liberal paradigm that concentrates exclusively on personal growth, and an activist paradigm that galvanizes youth around the social concerns surrounding them" (Arzola, 2008).  As an alternative, the youth ministry will take a "prophetic paradigm that integrates the three and cultivates young people who are spiritually rooted, emotionally mature and responsive to the needs of their community" (Arzola, 2008).

This prophetic paradigm moves beyond viewing the youth as fragile and unpredictable, to engaging the youth as a divine resource with the potential to foster integral missions.  Such a re-conceptualizing of the youth allows us to look at the practice of vocational discernment and how it encourages youth ministry to continually help young people discern their gifts, connect them in service to meet the world's deep needs, and foster Christian discipleship. Thus, the essence of youth ministry at its best should be to mobilize the faith community to support young people as they learn to live as disciples of Jesus Christ (Kaster, 2016).

As disciples of Jesus, the youth volunteer their time and energy, to participate in social-economic transformations of their environment, to utilize their capacities in new technology, and given a chance, they can participate in decision making within the church and in governments thus, effectively participating in governance.

## 2. Youth Spirituality in African Conception

In Africa, spirituality is an integrated part of life regardless of one's age or gender.  Thus, there is need to emphasize integrating spirituality with every developmental phase i.e. during childhood, teenage/youth and adulthood. Expressions of spirituality may differ from one phase of life to the other but are evident in each phase.

However, the challenge in Africa today is that we have a society with a social construct of the adolescents and young adults as children. Every youth, as long as they are not married are regarded as children. These traditional lenses that view the youth as children, needing guidance that should be dictated to them, denies the emerging adult the enabling environment that allow empowered transition into adulthood. During adolescence, many emerging adults rebel to assert their autonomy from being regarded as children. What is seen as rebellion is the process the adolescent engages of "changing the self to support the context and altering the context to support the self" (Lerner, R.M., R.W. Roeser, & E. Phelps (eds.), 2008:5).

Spirituality as a construct grows with deepening social-religious relationships.  The context provides the youth with fundamental relationships that shape spirituality.  A youth depends on the context and relationships constructed by adults for spiritual formation. When horizontal relationships are thriving with significant others such as parents and mentors, the vertical relationship (the relationship with the transcendence) is reinforced, particularly when the adults interpret or attach their beliefs, actions and attitudes to Christian faith.

When these relationships are all encompassing, they give the young person the lenses through which they view and interpret reality. If the reality modeled by adults integrates spirituality, with career, business, governance, decision making, integrity, hospitality, character, and ethical/moral values, then the youth will embrace these as the defining character of being a Christian. The youth, without struggle, will be able to integrate spiritual and physical realities in a monistic manner.  As Jos de Rock and Ronelle Sonnenberg put it, "human experience and learning are rooted in flesh-and-blood bodies," (2012:7) which means that the focus of youth ministry should not be "seen as appendix of Christian education"(Malan, 2003)but as a formation process that integrates the emerging person to ministry as an adult.

Thus, youth ministry becomes the vehicle that the community and the church, specifically church leadership, would utilize to mainstream the youth as a divine resource ready to serve ministry needs, governments, private sector and to spread Christian faith. We now turn to unprecedented signals that the youth are indeed the engine for every growing church with ability to become a trans-generational church.

## 3. Youth Numbers as a Resource-base for Ministry Engagement

In a survey conducted by the UN IANYD in August 2012, 13,000 respondents expressing their voices from 186 countries highlighted that the main challenges for youth were limited opportunities for effective participation in decision-making processes. With limited opportunities and exposure to meaningfully participate in inclusive decision-making processes, young men and women feel excluded and marginalized in their churches and communities. The need for participatory structures and greater trust between youth and institutions for greater capacity development were also stressed (UN youth: Youth and participation, 2012: 2).

Young people between the ages of 15 and 25 constitute a fifth of the world's population. The Churches are getting more and more youthful following this global trend. The youth are hardly involved actively in formal governance institutions and processes of the church and society. In the church a negligible percentage of the youth sits in the highest decision-making bodies of the church. If you take the political arena as an illustrative example, only 1.65% of parliamentarians around the world are in their 20s and 11.87 % are in their 30s (UNDP and IPU, 2012 Global Parliamentary Report).

Globally, youth issues are coming into sharp focus. Governments and states are realizing the importance of youth participation in decision-making. Similarly, the church ought to realize the centrality of effectively utilizing the youth resource for posterity. Regarding them as a resource (not an appendix) will enable protection and enforcement of their basic human rights, and their active and meaningful participation in their churches, societies and in democratic practices of their nations (Page xxxv, World Youth Report, Young People's Transition to Adulthood: Progress and Challenges, UN DESA, 2007).

The youth can be a creative force, a dynamic source of innovations, and they have undoubtedly, throughout history, participated, contributed, and even catalyzed important changes in church history, in political systems and economic opportunities. However, youth engagement in key decision-making today makes Ban Ki-moon, former UN Secretary General laments that the "youth should be given a chance to take an active part in the decision-making at local, national and global levels" (Ki-moon, 2008).

When the church leadership recognizes the potential, the youth has in designing and participating in the implementation of a sustainable development agenda, the faith community will start celebrating young peoples' views and initiatives. Additionally, the faith community will forge collaboration with the youth in governance and thus include them in decision-making processes that transform the social norms that govern engagement in ministry. This collaboration should entail formal and informal engagement in order to enable the youth participate setting ministry priorities and to participate in the establishment of institutions that allow them to become fully integrated in the core functions of the church. This would in turn help the many youth realize their right to participate[1] in ministry processes and practices to ensure the achievement of agreed ministry development goals.

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[1] Participation is one of the guiding principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and young people's right to participation has been deemed important in numerous international agreements. For instance, in 1994, 179 countries recognized the importance of ensuring young people's "integration and participation in all spheres of society, including participation in the political process and in preparation for leadership roles".

## 4. Technologically Savvy Youth as a Resource

Youth are the drivers of cyber space today. They are spending most of their active hours engaging their contemporaries globally. The youth in church place a strong emphasis on social media and information technology. Some are on social sites even when attending church services. They are unable to disengage from their phones. They are usually taking a selfie or responding to a chat from a contemporary.  Besides this negative use of technology, the youth can be mobilized to use technology for positive impact on their relationships, spirituality and social engagement.

The youth can be mentored to use technology to drive cyber ministry to unprecedented levels. In their tweets, instagram posts, facebook posts and others, they can run a virtual church that can interphase with the physical church at some points of convergence if planned for. With the new appetite to share their nearly minute by minute thoughts, activities and convictions through various social sites, the youth are a great resource for driving ministry to new levels. All the church leadership needs to do is to come up with creative and innovative strategies of tapping this natural talent to create social-economic partnerships with the youth for service delivery within the church and in the larger society.

Not many churches world over have functional websites that are updated regularly yet they all have youths who are very active in the cyber space. Announcements in church have been done in an archaic style for nearly fifty years, yet there are youths in every generation that can creatively inform that part of the liturgy by creating alerts to members on key activities happening in their churches during the weekdays and possibly in the neighborhood.

Governments are entrenching youth technology and culture into political discourses. Presidents are running twitter accounts, and facebook accounts to connect with the youth. Government ministries, the private sector and non-governmental organizations are partnering with the youth to create mobile apps that help reach their audience to generate innovative solutions. For instance, the ministry of health in Kenya has partnered with some youths to create a mobile app that patients can use to monitor their sugar levels, and blood pressure without going to hospital. This partnership alone has led to improved healthcare in the country.

In Jordan, UNDP has supported Ministry of Planning and Development (MoPD) to amplify its engagement with youth through Facebook and twitter, with a view to facilitating online discourse. UNDP also supported MoPD to develop a database of youth online groups in order to more systematically solicit input from youth groups on how to spur youth participation in the country's political life. The 'Youth Participation in Local Governance' project has sponsored an innovation camp for youth, with features like mock elections, and interactive training on public speaking, the use of social media for development and other skills (UN Youth: Youth and political participation in political, 2012:3-4).

One of the greatest needs in African Churches today is the need to support innovative and catalytic projects on youth to inform public policy-making. This would involve training the youth as effective leaders, and opening up spaces for youth empowerment. An empowered youth who is well nurtured in his/her Christian beliefs will be a strong driving force to depress youth exclusion in society and "other forms of marginalization linked to gender, location, culture and/or community" (UN Youth: Youth and political participation in political, 2012:3). Creating and strengthening church-based youth advocacy groups will enable the Christian youth to interact with public authorities and become key stakeholders in the creation of local, regional and national Christian youth assemblies for community transformation.

Thus, the future of ministry in Africa and indeed the world is tied to how well we utilize the youth resource to drive ministry agenda. The youth have a unique way of engaging their realities. What they need is someone to empower them in designing and implementing youth-centered initiatives that take into particular consideration the development of appropriate and realistic indicators for youth. These should be based on institutional and contextual analyses in order to strengthen the existing church programs and possibly give birth to new programs which adequately and effectively engage their realities. Such skills can enable them to competitively engage in partnership building with the wider society for income generation as they design youth-centered initiatives that address needs in the wider society.

## 5. Wayforward

### 5.1. Strengthen Youth Public Policy Making Skills

As a way forward there is need for an Internship Program in every church that can be expanded to orient a greater number of youth in public policy making skills. Sucha program will provide them with a training opportunity on public policy making tools. It will also introduce them to the governance and oversight functions of various church boards and governments. Youth participation in church boards to voice youth priorities will mean that voices of young people are reflected upon and recognized as critical to informed decision-making for growing healthy churches and communities. This early exposure on the framework of making and implementing decisions within the church will in turn create ownership and greater participation in the life of the church.  A program of this kind will not only provide an entry point for the youth to participate in church governance but will also help them come up with follow-up actions for youth to engage on policy definition since the overall objective would be to enhance youth awareness on ministry planning and strategy implementation. A youth who goes through such an exposure is likely to experience a greater sense of belonging and appreciate the need to participate in the life of the church. Empowerment of this nature improves the youth's negotiation skills and trains the youth to become competitive in their careers since to make a contribution during board meetings, the youth leaders would need to engage in research among their fellows.

Internship programs can be used to mobilize youth groups to access justice and fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution. These can help the young people align their priorities to national strategic objectives for better social and economic opportunities and social inclusion. Internship programs can be designed as avenue through which the unemployed youth can get business opportunities or enter into career networks with capacity to support and empower disadvantaged youth in church.

As a result, the youth can easily form faith-based advocacy groups to advocate for justice and social inclusion of disadvantaged youths in the society.  Such engagements would invigorate youth ministries since such initiatives are grounded in the principles of integral mission. To promote this cause, they can partner with television and radio stations to pass knowledge, attitudes and skills for effective youth participation in public affairs. By broadcasting their stories oriented around the decision-making, policy making and implementation experiences they breakdown stereotypes that youth should refrain from active roles in public life. With such engaged youth, the national governments would find it a lot easier to factor in youth concerns into their national development plans. The church therefore, should develop its strategic plans informed by strategic youth initiatives and activities that will drive the church agenda to the next century.

In order to achieve the foregoing, churches must respond to the following questions: Firstly, does existing church policies adequately address youth concerns? Secondly, do churches have a written youth strategy plan? Thirdly, do churches have a system of monitoring and evaluation of existing youth programs to ascertain their relevance and focus?

### 5.2. Research-based Youth Ministry

Every church has structural factors that either prohibit holistic development of youth ministry or provide an important backdrop for analysis on young people's engagement in spiritual formation that is cognizant of how young people themselves perceive their situation. For that purpose, churches need to partner with research institutions to help conduct surveys. Data on young people's attitudes towards the effectiveness of their youth ministry programs and what improvements are needed is long overdue. Such data would allow for analysis around participation and apathy, trust in institutions, support for church led initiatives, and perceptions of governance and corruption among young people. These findings can provide important background for identifying entry points for engaging young people in governance activities (Youth and Political participation, 2012: 6).

### 5.3. Youth as a Key Stakeholder in Ministry

Recognizing young people as key stakeholders in ministry, and government development agenda would greatly inform how churches design and implement youth ministry programs. Such programs would take into serious consideration youth priorities mainstreamed into the vision and the mission of the church. As a strategic objective it is imperative that churches plan for young leaders who through nurture and mentoring will transform ministry approaches by infusing relevant and timely ideas for posterity. By so doing, the church community would view the youth as leaders able to inform governance in church and in society. Viewing the youth in this manner, would make church leaders realize they are "creating a critical mass of leadership for good governance in the region by investing in key change makers with a sphere of influence on governance outcomes" (Youth and Political participation, 2012:6).

### 5.4. Broad-based Youth Ministry Curricula and Programs

Research institutions in conjunction with national church bodies such as National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK), Evangelical Association of Kenya (EAK) etc., can come up a broad-based curriculum that proposes various measures aimed at spiritual development, job creation, social inclusion and youth volunteerism among others as core tenets of youth ministry programs. Such carefully planned and integrated pursuit for knowledge-based spirituality would enhance youth participation in ministry and in their careers informed by acquired Christian values. Such a curriculum would, as a matter of necessity, incorporate youth-focused training programs aimed at developing spiritually mature young leaders who eventually work in governments, non-government organizations and businesses to provide leadership and good governance while within the age bracket of 25 – 35 years.

With such an aim in youth ministry, churches can partner with local and international organizations in meeting this objective. As a strategic direction in youth ministry, the curriculum should include customized leadership resource kits and train youth pastors and workers as mentors able to skillfully integrate mission and career as a transformation strategy. The outcome of implementing such a curriculum is having a pool of beneficiary youth who are highly successful stakeholders that ensure continuation and recruitment of more youths in the programs. As a consequence, the churches will have more youth attend church services and participate in the great commission outlined in Mathew 28: 19-20.

### 5.5. Youth Volunteerism

Volunteering is defined as an unpaid activity done on one's own free will to benefit community and society. Governments and non-governmental organization use it to meet their staffing need. Individuals benefit by getting hands on experience in specific tasks relevant to their careers. It is a practical formation process that grows the volunteer in real life experience. Churches can adopt and adapt volunteerism as a means of creating skilled youth in the churches who actively participate in church activities and in society while achieving their personal goals.

The United Nations General Assembly recognized the need to promote volunteerism in 1970 when they established and mandated the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Program to "promote volunteerism to support peace and development worldwide" (UN Youth: Youth and Volunteerism, pg. 2). More than forty years later, the churches though having many youths willing to volunteer their time, energies and abilities as their service to God, have lacked policies that tap such potential to meet their ministry needs. Volunteerism when planned for can easily become a mentoring program for the emerging adults to develop Christian value systems, competencies necessary at the market place and nurturing leaders for community transformation. As volunteering becomes increasingly popular in corporate settings, the question is, can churches take advantage of this emerging trend to meet their ministry needs?

Volunteerism is a key resource in youth ministries and organizations for two reasons. Firstly, volunteerism is a symbiotic relationship that benefits the individual and the host institution in equal measure. Volunteers grows in their practical knowledge and knowhow while performing assigned tasks. They also develop competencies that empower them to actively participate in society as productive individuals. Besides this personal benefit, they often help to carry out program work and to achieve the organizations' values and goals. Secondly, volunteers acquire beliefs, attitudes and professional ethics that are fundamental in establishing value-based relationships in cross-cultural contexts. This makes them competitive at the workplace and productive members of the society.

The church therefore can deliberately plan to be part of the transformation of the youth by providing opportunities for volunteerism in the church and church-based organizations. Opportunities of this nature will inform the kind of mentoring programs that instill values in the youth members within the church and also in preparing a workforce that transforms society using values acquired through volunteerism in churches.

In terms of mission, a church through volunteerism can send career missionaries in every sector of the society. Volunteerism can also be incorporated as a process of church renewal. The aim of every church is to exist across generations spreading the gospel of Christ. Effective youth engagement in the core functions of the church is of paramount importance since the more youths know how churches function and understand the process of coming up with ministry priorities, the more they are likely to uphold the vision and mission of that church. Commitment to the mission and vision of the church becomes the driving factor that improves individual's participation in church activities.

Volunteerism as a resource can transform church memberships. Youths can get exposure depending on their interest. Those interested in banking and finance, can be involved in participating in the processes of handling finances in the church. Those interested in becoming administrators can be attached to support administration logistics in the church. For churches with media houses, youth can volunteer to perform tasks within the media houses as a strategy to prepare Christian journalist. Youths skilled in events organization and mobilization, can join committees that plan such events for church. The youth interested in becoming communication experts can strengthen internal and external communications of their churches by volunteering to drive the church's vision and mission through websites, social networks, and intranet. The youth have the potential, the skill and the time to execute every dream as an outward manifestation of their faith in Christand as a means of participating in the great commission.

Youth volunteerism can be quantified in financial terms. Their *pro bono* services would cost the church a handsome amount if a casual or an extra employee is engaged. The UN recognizes that globally, "the youth contribute over $35 billion per year in volunteer hours and are more likely than any other age group to have volunteered informally in the past years. Every year, more than 6,500 online volunteers between the ages of 18 and 30, representing 65% of all online volunteers, are mobilized" (UN Youth: Youth and volunteerism, pg. 1).

It is time for churches to make youth volunteerism a core value in youth ministry. As a core value, churches will design programs for recruiting new volunteers whom they train and keep actively motivated to contribute to youth ministry. As church in Africa, there is need for a culture by church management boards and other entities to foster youth-led initiatives informed by national, international conventions and declarations, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the World Program of Action for Youth and the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

## 6. Conclusion

The young people have the skills and capacities to participate actively in all ministry aspects just as effectively as the mature adults. The ability of young people and young people-led initiatives to contribute to the achievement of durable solutions for ministry in the 21st century cannot be underestimated. The greatest contribution in ministry is likely come our way once we accept that the young people have the skill and the capacity to identify and implement sustainable solutions in church and society. Thus, churches need to promote an enabling environment (through policies and plans) for young people to participate in a broad range of processes and areas such as church administration, developing mission strategy, youth strategy and developmental plans for church as their contribution to building the kingdom of Christ.

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